

project: VALHALLA



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For Anita and Clare

Preface

In a land of eternal night stands a young girl, alone and frightened, the after-image of a tall blue box still imprinted on her retina, its dying breath taking with it the promise of the future.

The girl sighs, wiping away the lone tear that runs down her cheek. 'All bets are off, ' she murmurs, and begins to look around the harsh environment she finds herself in. Wind whips across the dark outline of undulating hills that she can make out in the moonlight and, all around her, the rock-strewn terrain is dusted with a crust of icy snow.

It is cold, but the girl doesn't feel it. Not any more. The hunger takes care of that.

The girl hefts the rucksack slung over her shoulder and turns to face the night. She begins trudging into the hills, feet crunching through the snow, her progress lit by the moon.

The streets are crowded, a herd of people busying themselves with the quests of the day - the tedious cattle of humanity fighting for survival.

Through the crowds walks a figure. A path clears for this black-clad hulk of a man, his long leather coat swishes heavily as he strides deliberately forward, eyes staring ahead.

The mundane chimes of a mobile phone pierce the wall of silence around the figure. The man produces the phone from within the dark folds of his coat and flips it open, cutting off its cheery tone. Still walking, still staring ahead, he speaks into the phone. His voice would cut glass.

'Nimrod. ' He listens for a moment. 'Yes, sir. I have no idea where Amelia is. She may or may not be dead. She has a charmed life.' More questions. 'No. The girl left with the Doctor and the Smythe woman.'

'Don't worry, sir. I'll bring her back for you. Alive.'

The phone snaps shut, the call ends.

The figure strides on, disappearing into the crowds as if he were never there.

Prologue

Forge Alpha Facility, Dartmoor - 2002

Private Mark Bradley sat at an inconspicuous grey table in an inconspicuous grey room at the end of an inconspicuous grey corridor. His kitbag sat by his side, a scrunched-up sheaf of order papers clutched in his hands like a security blanket. His eyes were wide and bloodshot with fatigue.

And now, as instructed, he was waiting. Waiting for what, he wasn't quite sure.

The last 24 hours had gone by in a blur and the young soldier was trying to avoid thinking about the sequence of events that had brought him here. He was in trouble, and that's all he was prepared to admit to himself.

The steel door set into the wall opposite slid open at alarming speed, jolting Bradley from his thoughts. A tall, thin man entered, wearing combat fatigues that had a lived-in look about them and sergeant's stripes on the sleeves. His movements betrayed a sense of weariness and, as the door hammered closed, the man looked down at Bradley through pale green eyes that were tinged with abject boredom.

'Private...' The sergeant glanced at the clipboard he was holding. '... Bradley?'

Bradley stood, suddenly remembering he was in the company of a superior officer. 'Yes, sir!'

'Sit down, son, we're not big on the bells and whistles of protocol around here.'

Bradley relaxed and sank back onto the chair.

'I'm Sergeant Frith, head of security here at the Forge. Let's see your orders.'

Private Bradley handed the crumpled sheaf of papers over to Frith, swallowing down his nerves before he spoke.

‘The Forge, sir? I thought I was being transferred to Department C4?’

Frith smoothed out the papers and looked them over. ‘Yeah, that’s right. Private Mark Bradley, 12 months’ active service with the Devonshire and Dorsets. Got into a spot of bother with live ammunition and some civilians who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Dishonourable discharge not an option, transfer immediate to Department C4.’ Frith handed the papers back with a mirthless smile and picked a stubby remote control unit from the table in front of him. ‘Otherwise known as the Forge.’

The sergeant pressed a button on the remote and the lights dimmed. Bradley looked around uncomfortably as a low hum surrounded him. A pulse of light winked into existence at the centre of the room, hanging low above the table. The hum changed in pitch as the pinprick of light blossomed, growing in intensity to fill the air until Bradley realised he was staring at a hologram. At least he assumed it was a hologram - every other briefing he’d been in on had generally used a flip chart. This was like something out of *Professor X*.

He leant forward, fascinated. What he saw looked like a three-dimensional cross section of a building. The image span slowly on its axis, the hum fluctuating in pitch as it moved.

‘The Forge,’ Frith continued, ‘a classified, secure facility located beneath Dartmoor.’ He thumbed the remote, and a cursor highlighted each level on the cross section in turn, accompanied by what Bradley thought was an unnecessary bleeping noise every time a new square lit up. ‘Twenty-five levels, entry gained through a network of lifts and access ladders. Laboratories, vehicle bays, barracks and executive accommodation, gym, firing range, ancillary storage areas.’

Data scrawled rapidly across the image as Frith ran through each level. About halfway down the schematic, Bradley had just enough time to read the words ‘Further levels classified’, which flashed intimidatingly across the image, before the display receded rapidly back to the initial point of light.

As the lights came back up, Bradley blinked away the glare of retina burn from behind his eyelids and unconsciously he looked up to the low, metal ceiling. ‘We’re underneath Dartmoor?’ he asked Frith, trying to keep the incredulous tone from his voice.

‘That’s right,’ Frith answered. ‘We’re about half a mile down here.’

A few seconds passed, allowing Bradley a moment of thought, which, on reflection, was probably a bad idea and he immediately regretted it. He frowned in confusion.

‘I’m not sure I understand, sir. I was involved in an incident and 24 hours later I’m shipped off to the middle of nowhere in a chopper and end up...’ Bradley held his arms wide in a shrug as he searched for the right word. ‘Here. I’m not even sure where here is!’

‘It’s simple, soldier.’ Frith’s tone didn’t change, still betraying the vaguely disinterested quality it had held since he walked into the room. ‘You screwed up and this is where screw-ups get sent. For your own protection. And the rest of the world’s.’

The sergeant threw a heavy envelope onto the table and Bradley eyed it suspiciously.

‘In there you’ll find your ID card, to be worn at all times, and a document of essential information. Read it. It might save your life.’ That mirthless smile again. ‘Might.’ Frith moved to the door, which opened automatically. When he realised that Bradley wasn’t following he turned back. ‘Come on.’

Bradley stood. ‘Where are we going?’

‘I need to give you the tour. At least the areas you’re cleared for.’

The young soldier began to gather his possessions together.

‘Leave your stuff, this shouldn’t take long.’

The lift door slid open with the same startling abruptness as all the doors Bradley had walked through in this place. Frith strode out ahead of him, his heavy boots echoing on the metallic flooring plates. Bradley stepped after him obediently.

‘Level 13,’ Frith announced. ‘Some admin staff are based down here, and the mess hall -’ he jerked a thumb towards yet another faceless door that stood opposite the lift ‘- is through there. The coffee’s crap and the nearest Starbucks is 40 miles that way.’ He waved vaguely into the darkness of the corridor that disappeared off at a right angle. ‘Mine’s a hazelnut latte with an extra shot of espresso if you’re buying.’

Bradley returned the look his new commanding officer threw at him and wasn’t sure if he was joking or not. He thought it best to come down on the side of *not* and responded with a smart, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘And that’s where your clearance ends. Private. Access to levels 14 through 25 is strictly off limits.’ Frith set off walking with a

brusqueness that hadn't been there before, suddenly adapting a more efficient swagger. Bradley jogged to keep up.

'What's down below, sir?'

Frith stopped and fixed the soldier with a serious look. 'The less you know, the better. For curiosity's sake, let's just say research labs, storage bays and places no man in his right mind would ever want to set foot. You with me?'

'Erm... yes, sir.'

Frith grinned widely, the first hint of an emotion beyond abject tedium Bradley had seen since they'd met. He slapped the lad's arm heartily. 'Cheer up, son. it might never happen.' With a throaty chuckle. Frith carried on up the corridor.

After a minute of walking in silence, the two soldiers arrived at an imposing set of double doors, heavily set in the same, brushed steel as everywhere else, creating a harsh, clinical atmosphere. Frith raised a hand and pushed his palm against a panel. It glowed red for a second, light tracing around the outside of the hand, before a luminous numeric keypad formed on a small screen above it. With a practised movement Frith pulled his palm from the panel and keyed a four-digit code.

'Oracle,' he announced into the air. 'Request access to Central Operations.'

Bradley was surprised when a silkily harsh female voice spoke seemingly from nowhere. 'Level-four clearance required for access to Central Operations.'

Frith's eyes rolled impatiently. 'Yeah, I know.' He sighed. 'In your own time, Oracle.'

Bradley looked around, searching for the source of the voice. 'Who the hell was that?' he asked, genuinely spooked.

'Private Bradley, meet Oracle, the Forge's data-net portal and central computer. All seeing. All knowing. Pain in the arse.'

Oracle's ethereal voice filled the corridor, and if Bradley didn't know better, he'd swear she... *it* sounded pissed off at Frith. 'Prepare for molecular sequencing scan,' the computer practically spat.

'Prepare for what?' Bradley asked a split second before the air began to throb with a pulsing, fizzing noise that seemed to slice through his entire body. His head span and his fingertips tingled with pins and needles. As the effect faded, he had to fight down the urge to

throw up all over the corridor. Next to him, Frith just smiled.

'Identities confirmed. You are Frith, Sergeant Martin, and Bradley, Private Mark. Level-four access granted.'

Heavy bolts released with a moan of hydraulics and the armoured, dull silver doors began to separate. 'This is where the real work takes place,' Frith said. He glanced back at Bradley before stepping through.

Bradley followed, swallowing down his nerves. 'But, sir...' He was stammering now, and he hated himself for it. 'I don't even know what work you...'

Bradley tailed off as he slowly began to take in his new surroundings.

This was a vastly different room to the dull, steel-lined corridors and rooms he had seen up until now. The lighting was softer here, revealing a high ceiling that rose a hundred, maybe 150 feet above him, tapering away into a darkened tangle of steel girders. It immediately removed the invasive sense of cramping dread that clung to every nook and cranny, the feeling that you were being trapped and buried. Come to think of it, the air seemed fresher and cooler.

Bradley's hand gripped the metal rail that he found in front of him, and he looked down upon the scene below from the catwalk that was slung around the perimeter of the room, suspended several feet above the floor.

He watched as Frith descended the steps that led to the floor, thick, grilled floor plates solid beneath his feet. Bradley followed his progress through three rows of computer banks and work terminals ranged in semicircles on either side of a central walkway. Bradley realised that similar consoles were ranged around the outside of the room, nestling just beneath the level of the catwalk.

People were working at the stations - the first people he'd actually seen since arriving. Some wore combat fatigues like Frith, but others had white lab coats, or were even casually dressed in jeans. The Forge must be staffed by a mix of military personnel and civilian scientists. As he watched the hive of activity, the Forge staff darted back and forth from one terminal to the other, consulting with colleagues or tapping on data pads. And it wasn't just humans who buzzed around the workplace. Between them, squat black machines scuttled here and there, depositing files or accessing ports with various appendages at the feet of the workstations. Bradley scratched the back of his neck

and blew out in bewilderment as he watched a white-coated woman disappearing through a door into yet another section of this labyrinth. This was going to take some getting used to.

Bradley nervously descended the steps and advanced through the crop of computer banks, eyes darting from side to side, trying to snatch the briefest of glances at the monitors, but it was what lay ahead that had caught his attention.

The entire back wall of the chamber was taken up by an enormous screen that cast a warm glow over the banks of both computer stations and personnel. It must have been 40 feet across and depicted a computer-rendered map of the world. Data flowed across other areas of the screen, with spidery lines snaking to various locations across the map.

‘You’re gawping, soldier.’ Frith stood ahead of Bradley, head framed by a halo of green light from the screen. Bradley suddenly realised he was staring vacantly up at the screen, and snapped his mouth shut, self-conscious in front of all these strangers.

He looked around the room, turning a complete circle. Underground bases, hologram generators, plasma screens the size of Watford and talking computers - all wrapped up in ludicrous cloak-and-dagger comings and goings. Something had gone mad and at this precise moment Bradley wasn’t sure if it was the entire world or just himself.

He turned full circle and fixed Frith with an even stare. He’d had enough of being bullshitted. ‘What is this place, Sergeant?’ he said, no longer concerned with protocol or etiquette. All he wanted was the truth.

Frith’s mouth curled at the edges, as though he’d seen this reaction a hundred times. ‘The Forge operates behind the curtain of the government and the military to harvest, study and utilise incursions of xenotech that may wash up on the shores of this planet.’

‘Xenotech?’

‘Little green men, to you and me.’

Bradley’s eyes widened, but he wasn’t particularly fazed. Like everybody, he had heard stuff. Rumours. ‘You mean like UNIT?’

Frith laughed, and one or two of the personnel close by were also sniggering, as if at some hilarious shared joke he wasn’t in on. Same old same old. Frith coughed, covering his amusement. ‘UNIT tends to

play a more... philanthropic role in the world of xeno-science.'

'And how do you utilise this -' Bradley let the unfamiliar word hang on his lips for a second - xenotech? How does it benefit the world?'

Frith considered the question for a second. 'Well, beyond countless things you don't have clearance to know, how about vegetarian bacon?'

'You're joking?'

'You don't think that muck was the product of a human mind, do you?'

Private Bradley shrugged. At this point, he was willing to believe anything.

Frith raised an eyebrow enigmatically. 'For King and country, son. For King and country.'

Bradley was about to comment on Frith's curious slip of royalty, but he glanced down and noticed a binder perched at the edge of a workstation. The embossed seal, which incorporated Leonardo's Vitruvian Man into its design, had the same mantra running around its circular edge - as did the insignia on the arm of Frith's uniform. Just how far back did the history of the Forge go?

A klaxon abruptly clamoured out of nowhere, quickly joined by the unnervingly smooth voice of Oracle. 'Alert. Incoming transport. Communication from Corporal Aristedes.'

Frith immediately pounced into action, and Bradley was impressed by his change in stance from bored tour guide to efficient professional. His eyes flicked over a computer bank, taking in information. 'All right, Oracle. Let's have it.'

The domineering central screen flared as new data poured onto it. Around the chamber, other personnel paused in their activities, looking up at the screen. Others continued what they were doing, unconcerned with events unfolding around them. Over the map of the world, a radar screen appeared, every flaring sweep highlighting a bright green dot.

Next to the radar, another smaller screen popped up, showing the face of a young woman standing against the backdrop of a darkening sky. Her features were. Bradley thought, possibly of Greek descent. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, and it flailed around in the wind. She wore the same combat fatigues as Sergeant

Frith.

‘Report, Aristedes,’ Frith called up to the screen.

‘Squad standing by to receive extraction team, sir. Pegasus One on final approach, ETA: five minutes.’

‘Roger that. Corporal. I’m en route to the surface now.’

‘And, Sarge?’ Aristedes looked straight into the camera.

‘Yes, Corporal?’

‘Be quick, will you? It’s bloody freezing up here and I’m dying for a fag.’

‘Corporal Aristedes.’ Frith was firm, but Bradley caught the hint of affection underneath his words. ‘Any more lip, and you’d better hope the fags kill you before I do.’

Bradley saw Aristedes grin and realised just how attractive she was, even at the other end of a fuzzy comlink. But she also had that quality the best women soldiers he’d served with had - the ability to be one of the lads. Either that, or you knew she’d knee you in the balls if you gave her a hard time.

‘Yes, sir,’ her voice crackled over the speaker. ‘Aristedes out.’

The screen disappeared, leaving the radar, showing its bright green return dot, moving rapidly closer to the centre.

Frith turned away and clapped Bradley hard on the back. ‘Come on, lad,’ he said briskly, and started walking purposefully towards the main doors. ‘Time to earn your keep.’

Bradley hurried after his superior. Frith stopped just before the doors, which slid open with that alarming speed, and turned back to the room.

‘Somebody inform Dr Crumpton. He’s back.’

WIND STRETCHED its chill fingers across the purple-brown landscape of heather that could be seen across Dartmoor as far as the eye could see. The darkening sky embraced the grey light of receding day as long as it could, giving the vast expanse a pleasing, washed-out inkiness of deepening blue.

Corporal Lysandra Aristedes readjusted her grip on the SA80 rifle clutched to her chest like a newborn, and breathed in the fresh air. Too much time underground wasn’t good for you, and she always savoured these moments when they were deployed topside. She liked the fact that you could see the stars up here, free of any pollution

from the world below.

She glanced at her watch. 'Okay, boys!' she announced to the assembled members of the security detail that stood with her. 'Two minutes to show time. Try to look alert. We'll have you tucked up with your cocoa and teddy bears as quick as we can.'

'You tucking us in, Corp?'' one of the squaddies asked, a leering smirk painted across his five o'clock shadow. Every now and then somebody, usually a recent transfer, tried it on, gently pushing the boundaries of authority.

'Ricketts,' she demurred, just the right side of suggestive, one eyebrow arched, 'if it helps satisfy the mother-fixation fantasy you've cast me in. I'll even read you a story.'

The rest of the lads jeered and Ricketts blushed, but it was the usual good-natured banter that got them through the day.

Behind them, silver double doors slid slowly aside.

'All right, people.' Aristedes took on a brisk tone. 'Ten hut!

ACCOMPANIED BY A DULL 'PING!', the rapidly rising elevator slowed and stopped, the doors sliding open on to cold air and encroaching darkness. As he followed Frith from the elevator, the cold wind stung Bradley's cheeks as it whipped across the expansive moor.

Bradley looked around curiously as they made their way over to the assembled security squad, all standing briskly to attention.

'I know it's pretty remote up here,' said Bradley, raising his voice over the wail of the wind, 'but surely there's always danger of being discovered.'

Frith flung his arm around, indicating the undulating sweep of the moor. 'Ground Zero is located at the centre of a discreet bowl in the terrain. It's enough to keep us hidden from radar sweeps, if anybody gets nosier, we have other methods of dealing with them.' The sergeant didn't elaborate on this point and strode on.

'Corporal Aristedes,' he said to the woman they had seen on the screen in central operations. 'Meet Private Bradley, our latest recruit.'

Bradley smiled awkwardly in Aristedes's direction.

'Welcome to the madhouse,' she said genially, throwing a look at the crumbling remains of eroded walls and buttresses that lay around them. Even the lift doors were set back in the recess formed by a large, now freestanding, crumbling fireplace. Bradley looked to Frith

in confusion.

'The Forge started life as an abandoned asylum, back in the 1890s. Things haven't changed.' He laughed. 'It's still a loony bin if you ask me.'

Aristedes shouted out to the men. 'You don't have to be mad to work here...'

'... but it helps!' chorused the team as one. Aristedes grinned widely and Frith shook his head good-naturedly.

Bradley could only stare blankly. Army humour. Great.

The bubble of humour popped as Aristedes hefted her rifle - time to get back to business. The corporal looked away into the distance beyond the ruins of the Forge's original home.

At the edge of hearing came a thudding whisper, a sound not quite there, like the whine of an irritating mosquito. It soon became more distinct, forming itself into the hammer thud of an approaching chopper, which appeared over a sharp rise in the landscape, running lights off, a dark blot against the deepening night.

An icy sheen exploded all around as blinding, cold halogen lights sparked into life, four of them illuminating a wide rectangle of ground that Bradley saw was a landing pad.

As the chopper closed in, he recognised it as a latest-model Merlin support helicopter, the type currently used by the RAF. Its tall, wide cabin with a snub nose gave it the look of a faceless bird of prey, and, as the pilot throttled down, the nose of the aircraft swept up and the three-point undercarriage extended from beneath the helicopter like talons ready to gouge the tarmac.

The beat of the rotors added to the wall of wind that blasted into everything, and Bradley was forced to turn his face away from the sting. Frith and Aristedes exchanged knowing looks. Bradley thought he caught a spark of something passing between them - dread, maybe?

The chopper's undercarriage finally made contact with the surface of the landing pad, touching down lightly with a brief, almost playful bounce of the tyres. Thumbs up were given by a soldier on the ground to confirm that the landing had been completed successfully.

'Give the word. Corporal,' said Frith briskly to Aristedes.

She responded with a curt and equally efficient, 'Sir,' before looking to the squad of Forge soldiers. 'All right, boys!' she shouted, her easy and likeable authority cutting over the clamour of the

chopper's engines. 'Keep it clean and quick. Let's go!' The soldiers surged forward, fluid and adept.

Rooted to the spot, Bradley wasn't sure if he should join the other men. or stay with Frith and Aristedes. Frith sensed his confusion. 'You're just eyeballing this trip, Bradley. Get a feel for the work. Come on.'

Frith started to move towards the chopper. Bradley made to follow but was stopped by Aristedes, who placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Bradley, keep your eyes and ears open. This isn't Iraq or Bosnia. It's the Forge. And take this.' The corporal handed him a comfortably solid gun, its dull grey edges glinting in the ice glare of the landing lights. 'Tranq gun. Trust me, soldier, you might need it.'

With a firm and reassuring nod, Aristedes followed her commanding officer towards the chopper. Bradley gazed dumbly down at the tranquilliser gun, turning it over in his hand, before looking after the squad of soldiers. He noticed for the first time they were all issued with the same weapons, and half were carrying long, sleek metal wand-like devices. A soldier held one of the devices aloft, pulling the trigger on the grip handle, and an arc of electricity discharged from the bulbed end. A cattle prod? What the hell was this chopper carrying?

Holding the tranquilliser gun tighter, Bradley walked nervously after Frith and Aristedes, who were now standing, along with the squad of soldiers, before the Merlin. Its rotor blades were beginning to slow and the whine of the engines receded like a relieved expulsion of breath.

The back of the chopper tapered slightly, and here they waited, the air heavy with tension. Frith and Aristedes stood side by side at the head of the squad, looking like obedient schoolchildren. As Bradley moved into a position where he could see what was going on, he spotted Aristedes close her eyes and breath out slowly, visibly preparing herself for something.

'Ready?' he heard her ask Frith.

A cargo ramp at the back of the Merlin began to lower with a dull hydraulic whine. The squad tensed, guns and frightful-looking cattle prods held tight. Bradley did the same.

Frith turned to Aristedes, and Bradley heard him talk over the drone of machinery. 'Here he comes,' he muttered. 'Darth bloody

Vader himself.'

Bradley gazed up into the darkened heart of the chopper as the ramp continued to lower. A figure was slowly revealed, framed at the top of the ramp, unmoving. As his eyes moved up the figure. Bradley took in black boots, emerging from beneath the heavy folds of a long, black leather coat that seemed to absorb the light from any source available. Arms were folded over a wide, powerful frame, but the face was shrouded in shadow.

Bradley shivered, suddenly aware of his surroundings again as the ramp scraped on to the tarmac.

The figure began to descend, slowly and deliberately, heavy boots thudding like piston engines on the metal of the ramp. Everybody in the squad tensed, as if an electric charge was passing through them, a wave of power emanating from the newcomer.

As he descended, the face was suddenly cast in the cruel blaze of the landing lights and Bradley wished to God it had stayed in the shadows. He stared in fascinated horror at the man - if indeed it was a man - and for all he knew the face of the devil stared back.

The skin was the colour of rancid milk, dead flesh bleached of any tone or warmth. Thin, cracked lips, so bloodless as to be blue, curled into a grimace, adding a downturned, pudgy contrast to the otherwise toned features. Hair was shaved to barely anything, and it was almost funny that the least alarming thing about this grotesque face was the lack of eyebrows.

But it was the eyes that freaked Bradley. Bright, blue eyes, flicking backwards and forwards, quickly assessing their surroundings. Intelligent eyes. Normal eyes. Eyes that swept over him, bathing Bradley in a probing gaze and the sudden realisation that there was a familiar signature of humanity somewhere within this... monster frightened the life out of him.

As the man turned towards Frith, Bradley realised he'd forgotten to breath for the last few seconds, and he sagged as his lungs emptied and refilled.

'Sergeant Frith.' The voice grated, as if he was gargling razor blades, but there was something more unnerving beneath, something unseen. Synthesised.

'Nimrod.' Frith returned the greeting. 'Welcome back. Was your trip successful?'

Nimrod's lips twisted into an approximation of a smile as the squad surged around him and up into the Merlin. 'Oh, yes. Very successful. Sergeant. Project: Twilight has come full circle?

'Glad to hear it,' said Frith, barely keeping his lack of interest at bay. Bradley wondered how long Frith had been working alongside this creature, this Nimrod - what was it with this place and all the stupid names? - to be able to keep his emotions under check. The private's guts were turning somersaults just at the sight of him.

Silhouetted against the light shining from within the depths of the chopper, the squad could be seen manhandling a tall, wide box the size of a large packing case down the ramp. The ultra-modern casket was angled and appeared to be made from strong plastic, although the sheering, scraping din it made advancing down the ramp was definitely metallic. On one side, a panel of switches was accompanied by the regular flashing of a light and a barely audible rhythmic beep.

'Oracle,' Frith called into the air. 'Containment status?'

'Containment field functioning at one hundred per cent efficiency?' echoed the all-seeing voice of the Forge, filtered from a hidden speaker nearby.

'Frightened, Frith?' asked Nimrod, clearly amused at the sergeant's unease.

'Not likely,' Frith countered. 'I just don't take risks where your lot are concerned.'

If Nimrod had eyebrows, one would have arched. 'My lot?' He let the question hang in the air for a second. 'Don't worry. It's quite secure.'

'All the same...' Frith pulled his sidearm from the holster at his belt and cocked the automatic pistol.

Nimrod, Frith and Aristedes stepped aside as the crate left the lip of the ramp and the men began to move towards the open doors of the lift, grunting with the exertion. The remainder walked along at the rear, equipment at the ready.

Bradley was separated from Frith as the crate passed between them. His eyes met with the sergeant's for a brief moment, and then he was obscured, along with - thankfully - Nimrod, as the box was heaved onwards.

A dark, narrow vent ran along the side of the crate facing Bradley. He was drawn to it, fighting a sudden compulsion to look inside. He

shivered. The same, probing feeling he'd had when Nimrod emerged from the chopper jolted through his body. From within the crate he heard a ragged, drawn breath.

As the crate shifted further forward, it passed through the glare of a landing light, illuminating, for a split second, the black interior.

For a brief instant, the watery glint of a human eye stared back at him before the darkness reclaimed it.

Bradley shook his head to clear it. Had he really seen that?

As they moved their burden further towards the waiting lift, one of the soldiers stumbled, losing his grip on the crate. A corner of the box struck the ground with a thudding crack. The rest of the squad all jumped back as a discharge of energy haloed around the crate before dissipating with a hiss that left a faint, burning tang in the air.

Oracle's husky, warning tones rippled around the landing site. 'Alert. Containment failure.'

The squad of soldiers moved away from the box, bringing guns and cattle prods to bear. Bradley saw Aristedes run into position and, knocking the safety off, bring her rifle up and aim it at the crate. However, with a swish of leather, Nimrod moved to block her way, savagely swatting his arm down on the weapon, spoiling her aim.

He heard Frith shouting orders.

He saw soldiers running back and forth.

He glimpsed the death-white face of Nimrod, those bright, intelligent eyes locking with his once more.

Suddenly the side of the crate ruptured from within and a dirty, claw-like hand smashed its way through the box with a screeching rending of metal and clamped taughly around Bradley's neck. He choked, grabbing the rigid, almost arthritically stiff hand, as pressure hammered down on his windpipe. He heard the dull shout of orders cutting through the air. A strange sense of being underwater washed over him. Soldiers raised tranq guns and fired directly into the vents around the crate, the darts expelling with a slap of compressed air, and the atmosphere arced and flashed with electricity as cattle prods were shoved violently through the vent slits. They discharged again and again, filling the air with the thick, acrid stench of singed flesh.

Bradley saw Frith, mouth wide in a scream of silent orders, running towards him and grabbing at the hand that was slowly squeezing the life from him.

As darkness began to bleed in at the edges of his vision, Bradley felt a slick stickiness oozing over his fingers as he grabbed the wrist of his attacker with both hands and realised that blood was flowing freely from his neck, if his vocal chords hadn't been severed, he'd be screaming. The air became hazed with a gauze of grey smoke, which flashed white with the lightning discharges of the cattle prods.

Through the smoke, the last thing Bradley's bulging eyes took in was the black wall of Nimrod, standing, impassive, arms crossed, the heavy folds of his coat wrapped around him like the wings of a bat.

THE CREATURE ENCASED within the crate finally succumbed to the intense barrage inflicted upon it, the rigid fingers snapping open as if released by a spring.

Frith felt Private Bradley's body go limp against his hand, a final breath escaping from his lungs with a drawn-out sigh, before it crumpled to the ground, lifeless legs folding beneath the dead weight. Staring dumbly at the slick gore on his hands, Frith turned from the wrecked crate and bloodied corpse, wheeling around to face Nimrod.

'Why didn't you do something?' he spat his anger at the hulking figure. Aristedes stood a few feet off, tensed, ready to step between her sarge and danger.

'Do, Frith?' Nimrod's voice was calm and clear against the staccato of Frith's venom. 'Security is your concern, Sergeant. You handled the situation - ' the hint of a smile softening the bleached face for a second '- adequately.'

'You bastard,' breathed Frith, regaining his composure. Behind him, the squad was pulling itself together.

Nimrod surveyed the wreckage, the sight of Bradley's body barely registering. 'Get one of your dogs to clean up this mess. And have the harvest secured in an observation cell immediately. She won't be out long, even with that dose pumping through her system.'

Frith continued to stare at Nimrod, breathing in and out steadily, bringing his surging temper under control.

'Kirk, Buchanan!' Two soldiers stepped up to attention. Frith's eyes never left Nimrod as he issued the orders. 'Form a stretcher party. Let's get this lad down below.'

'Sir!' The soldiers hurried off, relieved to be away from the situation.

‘The rest of you, carry on.’

Jolted into action, the remainder of the security detail took up positions around the crate, all avoiding going anywhere near the twisted rent of blood-spattered metal down one side.

As one they strained and hefted the solid weight of the box aloft, moving towards the still waiting lift.

As the box passed in front of Nimrod, he watched its progress intently.

Corporal Aristedes shivered as she moved after the men. just for a moment, she could have sworn she heard a soft heartbeat, whispering like so many voices in the cold air, but then it was a gone. Probably a trick of the wind.

As the crate finally scraped into the lift, she stepped in after it, joined seconds later by the silent, brooding Frith

Nimrod watched the lift doors close.

The wind sliced across the moor, into the dip in the landscape that hid the Forge from prying eyes, whipping the field agent’s coat into a dramatic frenzy.

He smiled - a full, open, private smile.

‘Welcome to the Forge, Cassie’

Twilight's End

Forge Alpha Facility - 2002

Nimrod stood silently before an imposing oak desk, waiting for the figure behind it to register his presence.

The office bore a firm contrast to the default decor of the Forge's many corridors and chambers. The thick pile carpet beneath his feet felt foreign, as did the recent addition of dark, wood-panelled walls. Expensive lamps cast discreet, homely glows across exquisite paintings, and an antique clock ticked its way hypnotically through meaningless minutes and hours. This was a world of brandy and cigars, of comfort. A world as alien to Nimrod as the technology this organization sought to plunder.

Atop the polished veneer of a drinks cabinet sat a silver-framed photograph of a family, posing for the camera. A loving wife and mother surrounded by three men in military dress uniform - a proud husband and two handsome sons. A shame the man sitting before him was a shadow of the energetic figure in the picture.

Deputy-Director Crichton still carried himself with an efficient gait, but the weariness that punctuated his movements belied a dark history. He was a well-worn ex-military man in his early sixties, with brown hair leaning towards a touch of grey, framing a full, square face. His best years were clearly behind him - his cheeks bordered on the jowly, and blood vessels cracked across their surface. A pair of half-moon spectacles perched on his nose as he perused the open file before him.

Crichton turned a page, frowning slightly as he pushed the file forward on to the desk. He removed his spectacles and regarded Nimrod calmly. Nimrod liked that. Crichton was one of the few people who had no fear of looking him in the eye. Doubtless he'd witnessed worse monstrosities at the height of his career.

‘Well,’ his superior said, clearing his throat. ‘It seems that congratulations are in order. Project: Twilight enters a new phase.’

‘I thought Project: Twilight had come to an end,’ replied Nimrod.

Crichton reclined in his chair, steeping his hands together in contemplation. ‘The harvesting of the sole remaining Twilight vampire -’ Crichton paused - yourself excluded, of course, puts a different complexion on matters.’

‘May I ask how?’ growled Nimrod quietly.

‘The Director and myself feel that the recovery of Cassie, a being born from a new strain of the Twilight virus, represents an opportunity that cannot be overlooked.’

Nimrod clenched his fists, anger starting to rise. ‘I have spent most of this -’ he spread his arms, indicating himself ‘- existence extinguishing the results of Project: Twilight. Abhorrent crimes perpetrated by the Government and the embryonic beginnings of this facility.’

‘Abhorrences committed by you, I believe?’ countered Crichton, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

‘William Abberton committed those crimes, not Nimrod.’

‘Ah, yes, let’s see.’ Crichton pivoted his chair upright and began to leaf through the heavy file, deftly replacing his glasses. ‘Project: Twilight. Instigated 1911 by order the Director, Department C4. Project coordinator Dr William Abberton.’ Crichton glanced over his spectacles at Nimrod at this point, before continuing. ‘Project goals: to create a super-soldier programme by fusing the DNA of a human subject with that of harvested vampire DNA recovered in South America.’

‘I am aware of the programme’s history,’ droned Nimrod.

Crichton continued, undeterred, skimming through several more pages before continuing. ‘Project notes: 4 October 1915. Successful incursion of 57 subjects, led by Twilights 7 and 45 - aliases, Amelia Doory and Reginald Mead. Forge casualties, 20, including Project-Coordinator Abberton. Abberton injected himself with the Twilight virus to survive. Assigned as codename Nimrod to hunt down and eradicate all rogue elements.’

‘Which was done,’ said Nimrod firmly. ‘The elimination of Reggie Mead and Amelia in London led to the final eradication of a vampire nest in Bristol.’

‘London, November 2001.’ Crichton read further. ‘Creation of new Twilight strain through collaboration with Twilight 7 and the being now codenamed Lazarus. New Twilight DNA present in Cassie Schofield, a former waitress at the club owned by Mead.’

‘And I have returned her to the Forge, as ordered. I had hoped that, on completion of my mission, I would be assigned to other duties.’

‘Other duties?’ Crichton asked rhetorically. He discarded the file and walked across the room to the drinks cabinet, where he poured himself a neat whisky from the crystal decanter. He didn’t offer Nimrod one. ‘This is too good an opportunity to waste, Dr Abberton.’ He stressed the name meaningfully and took a sip of whisky. ‘Project: Twilight made mistakes, and we cleaned them up, but there is work still to be done. Your insight into Cassie’s being and nature makes you the ideal candidate to continue the work that was begun in 1911. She could become a valuable asset to the Forge, and you are now ordered to train her to full field-operative status.’

Nimrod said nothing for a few seconds, considering his reply. ‘I could walk away.’

‘Resign?’ Crichton laughed and took another sip. ‘I’m sure the employment avenues open to somebody of your nature would be plentiful in the private sector.’ The deputy-director strolled back to his desk and placed the tumbler carefully on the desk. ‘You know as well as I do that you don’t leave the Forge. The Forge leaves you.’ The last words were said cruelly, with a sneer behind them.

‘It seems I have little choice, Deputy-Director,’ observed Nimrod.

‘It would seem that way.’ He raised his glass in mock toast. ‘Dismissed.’

Nimrod turned quickly. A wooden panel set into the wall slid aside, revealing an outer office. The walls and floor were the familiar dull metal trappings of the Forge. Without another word, he left.

THE DOOR SLID CLOSED and Crichton looked after Nimrod for a second. He drained the whisky and, massaging his brow to ease away the tension of the day, walked back across to the drinks cabinet. He picked up the silver-framed picture and stared with hollow eyes at the happy family.

The Northern Light

Lapland - Present Day

Magnus Dunfjeld inhaled deeply from his wooden pipe, then exhaled a blossom of aromatic indigo smoke, which began to curl and dance, forming ghosts in the air. He rocked gently back and forth in his chair and watched as the phantoms cavorted about him in the evening air. Chuckling to himself, the old man's toothless grin spread wide across his leathery face as Lemminkainen, the trickster himself, jigged and twirled in the winds of Bieggåålmaj, hopping along on his eternal quest for love.

How he had loved these legends as a child sitting on his grandfather's knee, as Iver now sat upon his, eyes shining with wonder and fear. The ancient ones had been friends to him in those cold, lonely days of his youth, even if many of his contemporaries had turned their backs on him. His peers may have sneered at his twisted leg, jeering that his family should have left the cripple to rot on the tundra, but the spirits of Mielikki, Tapio and Nyyrikki had never abandoned him. The people may have banished them to the shadows of myth and fairy tales centuries ago but in his heart of hearts Magnus believed that their companionship had kept him alive as much as the care and love of his own dear family.

As the wisps of smoke faded away into the twilight air, taking Lemminkainen with it, the smile fell from the old man's lips. The past was going the same way around here. Like smoke evaporating in the breeze, the customs of their people were vanishing. The Sami, once the masters of the ice, had become nothing more than curiosities, a tourist trap of antiquity used to sell a few trinkets to gullible travellers looking for the real Santa Claus.

Magnus's face crumpled into a scowl as he padded more tobacco into the bowl of the pipe. The people of this village were strangers to

him now, with their foreign technology and new vocations. He had more in common with the Nojds of the old days - apart from their habit of glugging down reindeer piss to 'fly' with the spirits. As least they knew the importance of the land and held the community together with their powers. When the missionaries had come from overseas they had dismissed the old ways as pagan and barbaric, but the old ways didn't pollute the air with rancid smog belched from infernal machines. Then Lapland had been a frozen paradise, nature and man working together, battling to survive against the elements. The old Lapland was now becoming lost amidst a grid of straight lines, greedy hearts and meaningless baubles. They had forgotten what it was like to hold one true purpose in their hearts, united across the fields of ice.

He clenched the pipe in his mouth and unscrewed the top on his hip flask, swigging back a generous nip. He coughed as the burn of the liquor trickled down inside, helping to guard against the frost that threatened to lay siege to his body. The only thing that could give him as much warmth these days was the bite of his daughter's tongue as she scolded him for staying out on the porch, stinking up the place with his tobacco. Pirjo had inherited the same barbed tongue as her late mother, but he was happy to let her fuss. She still had that spark of what made them special, of what made them Sami. Frowning, Magnus lit a match and ignited a red glow in the bowl of his pipe.

The blare of a car's horn tore his attention from the ritual of lighting his pipe and Magnus raised a hand in greeting to Doctor Jackiesson as he sped by in that shiny French car of his. Yes, times had changed indeed when doctors travelled by petrol rather than the power of the wind and cured using chemicals rather than reindeer blood. Perhaps the changes would never stop, perhaps that was the way of the world, but Magnus didn't have to like it.

Through the renewed curtain of smoke Magnus watched as the Northern Lights flickered across the sky, shades of mauve, green and red bleeding through the dark expanse of space itself. The Nojds would have believed that the mystical lights were a sign from the heavens that their gods still existed and cared for them, the aurora flaming in the frustration and anger they felt at a creation turning its back on them. A smile played on Magnus's lips. Maybe that was why the sky burned tonight, maybe the gods have finally had enough of

the new ways and sought to remind them all of that...

A thin thread of drool broke from the stem of his pipe as it dropped from Magnus's mouth. He'd watched the lights since he was a child but in all his years he had never seen anything like *that*. Across the the sky shot a ball of fire, arcing through the cosmos like a flaming sleigh. Magnus gaped in awe as it streaked past with the brilliance of a newborn star before tumbling from the heavens as fast as a bird shot down by the hunter's arrow. Down it plummeted, a tail of bright blue light emblazoned across the heavens that continued to burn for several seconds after the ball of fire had passed. Magnus watched as this heavenly display disappeared behind the nearby mountains. For the briefest of heartbeats the night air pulsed with a dazzling flare as something hit the ice, a rumble of thunder rolling across the landscape. A flock of birds flew up into the air, and then silence.

The pipe dropped from Magnus's grip, extinguishing with a sharp hiss on the slush beneath his feet as the night drew suddenly close and cold around him. What had he just seen? Had anyone else witnessed the star falling?

And more importantly did anyone else in this fractured little community share his sense that something had just changed their lives forever?

Forge Alpha Facility - Present Day

'Alert. Code one priority. Alert.'

Frith swore under his breath as Oracle's hollow voice echoed around central operations, accompanied by the annoyingly harsh blast of the alert klaxon.

'We get the message, Oracle. Let's see it. And turn that bloody racket off while you're about it.'

'Complying, Sergeant Frith.'

Mercifully the noise ceased, and the central screen flared as the world map view was replaced with a planetary telemetry screen, relaying orbital data of the northern hemisphere. Elsewhere, personnel consulted screens and tapped urgently into keyboards, already processing the data flowing before their eyes. A green dot glowed brightly on the central screen, moving steadily over the rendered display. Next to Frith, Aristedes clattered away at her own keyboard.

Frith frowned up at the screen, focusing on the brightly glowing dot. 'Twinkle twinkle,' he murmured to himself. 'Any chance it's a meteor, Oracle?'

'Negative. Satellite bounce-back is not compliant with resonance energy signature.'

'I have no idea what that meant, but I'm assuming it was a no.' Frith placed both hands firmly on the console in front of him and sighed. 'Okay. Oracle, inform the deputy-director before the old bas-'

'It's all right, Frith, I'm here,' a clipped voice announced from behind, accompanied by the steady tap tap of immaculately polished shoes on the metal walkway.

Frith coughed and stood upright, wincing inwardly. 'Yes, sir.'

'Oh, at ease, man.'

Deputy-Director Crichton stepped up beside the sergeant and peered up at the screen over his glasses. 'Status?' he asked Frith, glancing rapidly down at all the screens in front of him and accepting a printout from a passing technician.

'Looks like we've got incoming rogue xenotech. Satellite scans picked up an orbital explosion and we've been tracking it.' Frith consulted the main screen, the green dot falling ever closer towards the earth. 'Oracle, has it entered the atmosphere yet?'

'Affirmative. Subject entered Earth's atmosphere 32.9 seconds ago. Projected trajectory estimates planet fall in northern Europe.'

'Oracle, keep tracking,' ordered Crichton. 'Let me have planet-fall coordinates as soon as you have them.'

'Confirmed, Deputy-Director.'

'And get me the director, now.'

'Complying.'

Almost immediately, the red telephone on the desk next to the deputy-director buzzed into life and he scooped it up urgently, pulling his glasses off at the same time. 'Crichton,' he spoke into the phone. 'Yes, good morning, ma'am. I assume you have this?' The voice at the other end of the line, somewhere within the corridors of Whitehall, buzzed incoherently. 'Yes, we're still tracking.'

The screen flared white for a split second, before returning to normal. The green dot was no longer hanging above the planet. Frith frowned. Whatever it was, it had a new home. More alien filth polluting the world.

‘Planet fall confirmed.’ Oracle seemed to take on a more ominous persona with this doom-laden statement as the screen zoomed closer, bringing up a view of Europe.

Aristedes pivoted her chair away from her screen towards Frith and Crichton. ‘Coordinates are uploading now, sir. Northern Europe. Lapland.’

‘Yes, ma’am?’ Crichton diverted his attention away from the screen, pausing to receive orders. ‘Understood. We’ll make the necessary arrangements.’

The handset came down hard on its cradle. Crichton turned to find Frith and Aristedes looking towards him expectantly, poised for orders.

‘They’re sending somebody down from London. Inform Nimrod and Dr Crumpton. Full department head briefing at 1700 hours. And let’s get the satellites in position over Lapland. I want to see what we’re dealing with.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Frith replied.

‘Carry on, sergeant,’ Crichton ordered as he strode from the control room, heels clicking on the polished floor.

Terror in the Dark

Lapland - Present Day

Iver pulled his blue-and-red felt jacket around him. The cold fingers of night jabbed through the heavy layers of clothing, probing his goose-fleshed skin beneath, despite the crackling warmth of the fire.

‘Aww, look at little Iver,’ Otto jeered, scratching his large head before snapping a branch easily and throwing it onto the fire. ‘He’s cold.’

‘Shut up, Otto,’ scowled Iver. He was in no mood for Otto’s teasing. He didn’t even know why he’d come out here and lit a fire in the woods with Otto and Anfonya, aside from Otto’s bullying ways always winning out. But then, he was the largest boy in the village, and sometimes it was less painful just to say yes.

‘Well, you should wear proper clothes, shouldn’t you?’ the thuggish-looking lad said to him. Next to him, Anfonya just grinned inanely.

‘I *am* wearing proper clothes,’ Iver protested, folding his arms over his tiny chest. ‘What’s wrong with these?’ Iver tugged at his jacket.

‘You look like you should be in a museum. Come and see the traditional Sami boy!’ Otto laughed his hateful, piggy laugh. Anfonya snorted alongside.

‘I do not!’ Iver retorted, cheeks reddening despite the cold.

‘Do too! Your family’s too old fashioned, Iver. My dad said so.’

Iver was determined not to burst into tears like he usually did. and he took a deep breath. ‘Why? Because we don’t have a snowmobile, because my family still believes in the old ways?’

Otto blew a raspberry through his fat, blubbery lips. ‘You sound like that stupid old grandfather of yours.’

Iver shrugged this off. Everywhere you went in the village, people talked about crazy old Magnus, but Iver didn’t care. He loved his

grandfather. 'Listen to the stories, little Iver,' he used to say when tucked up into bed. 'They are windows onto a forgotten world.' Iver smiled as he remembered his grandfather's comforting words.

'What are you smirking at?' demanded Otto.

Iver shook his head. 'Nothing. Just thinking that it was nearly Christmas,' he said, drawing puzzled looks from the others.

Otto threw a stone across the fire, but it landed a foot short of Iver, its intended target. 'So?'

'I wouldn't want to be out here on Christmas Eve.'

'Why not?' asked Anfonya, speaking properly for the first time. 'What's so bad about this place?'

Iver just smiled again, slyly this time. 'Surely you must have heard about how Stallo slaughtered a group of boys, here in this very spot?'

Otto blew another raspberry, his favourite sound, but Anfonya's eyes had widened slightly, and Iver could see the germ of fear. However much their families might turn against the old ways, no Sami child could resist a story of Stallo. All three of them had been frightened into bed with threats that Stallo, the Wildman of the Winter, would be creeping through the villages looking for kids who refused to go to sleep. Even Otto, despite his sneery bravado, could always be spooked by a story about Stallo.

Iver grinned in the light of the fire. This was going to be fun.

'It was Christmas, a long time ago,' he began, recalling his grandfather's words. This had been his favourite story when he was little, despite his mother's concern that Magnus was scaring her child to sleep with his bloodthirsty legends. 'Three boys, just like us, were here in this very wood.'

'Why weren't they at church?' Anfonya asked softly, immediately drawn in. 'Surely they would've been made to go on Christmas Eve.'

'These were bad boys,' Iver replied, 'a pair of twins and their younger cousin. They couldn't be bothered to sit through a boring mass, so when their parents took them to church they would slip away. They wanted to find a reindeer to gut in the woods, just like they'd seen their father do many times before.'

Around him all was silent, as if the forest itself was leaning in to listen to what happened next. Otto absently poked a twig into the frost-crusted snow, but Iver knew he was listening. Anfonya was utterly hooked and kept looking nervously around him into the dark

mass of the woods around them.

'But they couldn't find a reindeer, and as they ran deeper into the woods, the blood lust began to take them, a dark evil flowing stronger in their veins the further they went. The knives they had stolen from their parents needed to taste blood, and something in the twins snapped.'

Anfonya jumped as the twig Otto was playing with snapped as he pushed it into the snow. He looked up, shamefaced. 'What happened?' Anfonya stammered.

'They turned on their cousin. They just fell upon him and slashed him with their knives.'

'They killed their own cousin?' This was Otto, big brave Otto, licking his dry lips.

Iver nodded, face expressionless. 'They didn't just kill him. After they had plunged their hunting knives through his heart they disembowelled him.'

Anfonya's face creased with confusion. 'What's disembowelled mean?'

'They spilt his guts, idiot,' snapped Otto, who was now desperate to hear the rest of the tale. 'But where's Stallo? I thought you said this was a story about Stallo?'

'It is,' confirmed Iver with a solemn nod. 'As the twins hacked and slashed at their cousin, a pair of red eyes was watching them from the trees.'

'Stallo,' Anfonya whispered, pulling his jacket tighter and chewing on a nail.

'Yes. Stallo.' Iver's voice was growing quieter all the time. 'The smell of the blood was driving him crazy with hunger. He leapt from the undergrowth and brought his staff smashing down on one of the twins' heads.' Iver slammed one palm into the other with a heavy smacking sound. 'He was killed instantly. The surviving brother fled in terror back to the village. He knew Stallo would be coming after him, so he hid in his grandmother's old wooden chest, and waited. And waited. And waited.'

'Did he get him?' Anfonya practically shrieked. Iver stared deep into the fire, nodding. 'Oh, yes. Stallo got him. Just as the boy was starting to think he was safe, Stallo crept into his home and blew red-hot ash through the chest's keyhole. The boy was burnt alive.'

‘Stop it, Iver,’ Anfonya shouted. ‘That’s horrible!’

Otto sniggered and pushed his friend over into the snow. ‘Idiot, it’s just one of stupid old Magnus’s ghost stories. It isn’t real.’

‘Isn’t it?’ Iver asked mysteriously. ‘Then who’s that watching us over there?’

Otto and Anfonya jumped as if shot, jerking round to look in terror at where Iver was looking. Iver couldn’t bear it any longer, and burst into fits of laughter. He’d got them, and got them good.

Otto turned back to face Iver, a grin plastering his face. ‘You little...’ he growled and dived forward, pouncing on his friend. The two boys began to wrestle good-naturedly around the fire as Anfonya watched.

And then a guttural moan cried out from somewhere in the woods, calling through the night air, the inhuman wail stopping the boys in their tracks.

They continued to stare into the darkness beyond the smudged orange circle of light cast by their meagre fire, which seconds ago had felt like a blazing inferno. Their faces were flushed with terror and they huddled together as what could only be a boot scraped across frozen ground.

Something was out there.

‘Is... is it Stallo?’ Anfonya stammered. Otto shot the smaller a boy a withering look, but Iver knew that even the lumbering school bully was as scared as anyone.

Iver shook his head and tried to sound knowledgeable. ‘I think it’s heading towards the village.’

‘What is it?’ whined Anfonya. ‘It is Stallo, isn’t it?’

Otto tutted under his breath. Iver suspected that he was as scared as they were, but in true Otto style wouldn’t allow himself to show it.

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ said Otto. ‘You’re as bad as Iver. It’s probably just one of my dad’s friends. They were heading over to Uncle Nicolas’s to play cards.’

Another inhuman wail shrieked out from the black, spindly mass of trees ahead of them.

‘Do all your dad’s friends sound like that when they’re going to a card game?’ Iver asked, trying to put the high-pitched squeak of fear out of his voice. Anfonya just started to cry quietly.

‘He’s coming to punish us,’ said the youngest of the three boys.

‘Who is?’ sneered Otto.

‘Stallo!’ Anfonya practically screamed back

‘That,’ snapped Otto, scrambling to his feet and jabbing a gloved finger into the darkness, ‘is not Stallo! And I’m going to prove it.’

Iver was now on his feet, facing up to Otto. ‘How?’ he challenged the bigger boy. ‘Are you going to go out there and ask him?’

‘Why not?’ said Otto defiantly.

‘And when it turns out to be one of your dad’s friends off to the card game, how are you going to explain what you’re doing out here?’ The two boys stared each other out. ‘I know you’re more afraid of your dad than you are of Stallo.’

Anfonya looked up at Iver and Otto, looking frantically from one to the other from his crouched position by the fire. Eventually Otto just shook his head and turned, running off across the snow, his carrot-topped figure quickly swallowed up as he ran out of the circle of light cast by the fire.

‘Where’s he going?’ gasped Anfonya, clutching at the material of Iver’s trousers. Iver tugged his leg away, more annoyed than scared now.

‘Trying to prove he’s the big man, that’s all.’ Iver scanned the darkness, looking for movement, waiting for Otto to jump out of nowhere and try to scare them some more. But everything was quiet.

Iver cupped a hand round his mouth. ‘Otto!’ he called out. ‘Come back, eh? You haven’t got a torch, you idiot!’

‘I told you we should have brought some,’ Anfonya pointed out unhelpfully.

‘It’s too late now, isn’t it.’ Iver breathed out, all fear replaced by utter irritation at his tedious friend. ‘Otto, get back here!’

Nothing.

‘What happened to the footsteps?’

Iver strained to hear. A cold breeze moved through the trees, churning up tiny whirlwinds of icy particles from the ground.

‘They’ve gone. Just a villager having some fun with us probably before going off to the card game to pour some of that reindeer pee down his neck.’

He looked out into the forest one last time, narrowing his eyes, trying to catch a flash of Otto hiding at the base of a tree, but there was no sign.

‘Come on.’ Iver held out his hand and hauled Anfonya to his feet. ‘I’m cold and Otto’s an idiot. He’ll come home when he’s ready. We’d better go before we’re missed.’

Anfonya looked unsure, torn between loyalty to Otto and his desire to get home where it was safe and warm. He came to a decision and nodded. ‘It’s silly, isn’t it?’ He looked to Iver for reassurance. ‘Stallo doesn’t exist, does he?’

Iver smiled. ‘No. Of course not.’

The boys turned and started to trudge in the opposite direction, away from the fire and the forest.

A prolonged scream shook the trees, echoing out into the darkness. It was shrill, harsh and full of sharp and sudden pain.

It could only be Otto.

The boys turned slowly to look back the way they had come.

Oh, God,’ chattered Anfonya. ‘Oh, God, what was that? Iver, what was it?’

‘I don’t know!’ shouted Iver.

‘It was Otto, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it?!’

In a bubble of silence that surrounded the void left when Anfonya stopped screaming, something wet and heavy slapped on to packed ice before boots began to scrape against the brittle ground once more. But, this time, they didn’t stop and they were coming straight towards the terrified boys.

‘It’s coming!’ Anfonya screamed. ‘It’s Stallo!’ Anfonya’s terror finally got the better of him and he turned and ran, bolting away towards the twinkling lights of the village and home.

‘Oh, God, Otto.’ Iver breathed out quietly, alone and still looking into the darkness.

Ahead he heard a slow, rasping growl and he could swear that he saw a tall, lumbering shape coming slowly towards him. Feeling suddenly sick and light-headed, he turned and ran after the screaming Anfonya.

THE DARK SHAPE continued its shambling, staggering progress across the snow. Booted feet scraped forward step by step, stumbling through the still burning fire, the charred wood hissing and snapping underfoot. The creature appeared not to feel the heat from the flames as it carried on, each step taking it closer to the waiting village.

Behind it, further back into the darkness of the forest, Otto expelled one last, gurgling breath, dying as his eviscerated guts steamed in the chill of the night air.

Forge Alpha Facility - 2002

Doctor Edith Crumpton blew on the surface of her hot cup of Earl Grey and took a grateful sip before sighing wearily. She glanced at her watch. Was it really another ten hours before a waiter would pull out a chair for her as she settled down to an intimate dinner for two in a Barbican restaurant?

As she placed the cup of tea down on its saucer, Crumpton allowed a smile to slowly spread across her lips. How long had it been since she'd received a dinner invitation from a gentleman friend? Not since her Portland Down days when there never seemed to be a shortage of men in her life. But that was a long time ago. A different time, and, as she caught a glimpse of herself in the monitor sat in front of her, she realised it had been a different Edith Crumpton.

But then she'd met Bob, and now she saw a glimmer of life away from this damnable place. She'd even been to the pictures last week. The last time she'd done that, *Jaws* had been on.

Crumpton's daydream evaporated as the stale air of the observation room was disturbed by the double doors hissing open behind her. She could have sworn that the temperature dropped as Nimrod swept in, accompanied by a trademark swish of leather. Didn't the melodramatic imbecile ever take that ridiculous coat off?

'Report, Crumpton,' he rumbled, his keen blue eyes peering through the rectangular strip of darkened glass that dominated the room. Various banks of equipment hummed and bleeped quietly to themselves around the room and an ECG monitor sat idling next to Crumpton's desk.

Used to the lack of pleasantries that characterised a meeting with Nimrod, Crumpton glanced down at her notes and cleared her throat.

'No change, I'm afraid. The subject has just been hanging there

since you strung her up. I don't even know if she's alive. The lack of vital signs makes her a difficult subject for assessment.'

Nimrod grunted. 'Oh, she's alive.' Nimrod crossed his arms across his body and fell silent and still - a pose that Crumpton liked to call his 'statue mode'.

Crumpton waited for her colleague to add something further, but after a few more seconds of silence, he turned and strode quickly from the room.

Crumpton closed her eyes and shook her head before returning to her observation of non-existent readings.

The light in the chamber beyond the two-way mirror rose to reveal the dishevelled creature suspended from the ceiling by chains, its arms stretched out like some cruel supplication to the heavens. Crumpton's eyes narrowed as the renewed illumination brought the sharp lines of her body into focus, the tight sinews of her limbs, the ribs pushing through the ghost-white skin.

In her heart Crumpton knew this wasn't right, that keeping any being captive in this manner - human or otherwise - was deeply inhumane. But then, that was never a concern here. A lack of conscience was a desirable trait for any Forge operative and, Lord knew, she'd committed some pretty despicable acts since she'd washed up here.

But maybe she was changing and, as she gazed on the pathetic creature chained up before her, she couldn't help feeling sick at the sight of the subject's head lolling forward, her chin resting on that thin chest, her matted hair forming a filthy curtain in front of her face. As Crumpton's mind wandered briefly to tonight's dinner date again, she realised that maybe she was still human after all.

To the left of the prone figure, a red light above a door flashed three times, before the clunk of hydraulics filtered over the observation room's tinny speakers. The heavy slab of door swung inwards and Nimrod stepped over the threshold and into the holding cell, carrying a leather bag in a gauntleted hand.

Crumpton watched as Nimrod fixed the subject with that steely glare and walked slowly but purposefully towards the girl who'd been hanging like a carcass in a butcher's cold store for the last two days. He stopped a foot away from her. What on earth was in that bag?

The hunter stood regarding his captured prey before whispering in

a voice so soft that the speakers strained to pick it up.

‘Hello, Cassie.’

His words had a dramatic and instant effect. The girl’s head snapped up, the fringe of greasy hair swinging aside to reveal a sharp and feral face. Despite herself and the reinforced safety glass between her and the holding cell, Crumpton moved her chair back in shock. This girl had been human once, but she was now nothing more than a wild animal, eyes brimming with rage and insanity. Her mouth, which Crumpton remembered from the pictures on file as being pretty, was twisted in a permanent snarl that revealed rows of sharp, yellowing teeth. She was beyond hope, no matter what Nimrod’s report stated.

Crying out like a wounded animal, the girl who had once been known as Cassie Schofield writhed her body with a scream of rage. Nimrod stood his ground as, with the sound of cracking bones, the chains tightened with a ratcheting into the ceiling. Cassie’s muscles popped as she strained against her bonds.

‘Cassie,’ purred Nimrod soothingly. ‘This won’t do, will it?’ he said, reaching inside the bag. ‘But you leave me with little choice. As long as you act like an animal...’

With one fluid movement he swung a hunk of bloodied meat from the bag and threw it at Cassie’s feet, it landed with a sickening wet slap against the metallic floor of the chamber.

‘... you will be treated like an animal.’

Cassie looked at the mass of flesh and blood, her eyes shining as her muscles went limp, saliva dropping in silver threads from her mouth. Nimrod stood for one last second before turning and stepping through the door, which clanged shut behind him.

Crumpton rubbed wearily at the back of her neck as seconds later Nimrod appeared at her side. Cassie was still strung up where he’d left her, her gaze transfixed by the meat.

‘And now, Dr Crumpton, it begins. Oracle. Release her.’

With a wrench of metal, the bonds securing Cassie’s wrists were released and she crashed to the ground, her face inches from the mottled hunk of raw flesh. She looked at it for a few moments, hunger in her eyes, but, with what looked like a supreme effort of will, Cassie turned away, scrabbling into the dark shadows at the corner of the room.

‘And how long do we continue this?’ asked Crumpton.

‘As long as it takes. Doctor.’ Nimrod turned to go, but stopped. Without turning back, he said, ‘Oracle, display file Abberton/Wilkins One.’

The screen nearest to Crumpton’s head flared into life and data began streaming before her eyes. Her throat tightened as the screen filled with a familiar face.

‘Robert Wilkins,’ continued Nimrod, not bothering to turn round. ‘Also known as “Bob”, in 1982 he was a key member in a group of environmental activists that committed acts of violent demonstration at major Government research departments across the United Kingdom, it is likely that Mr Wilkins has mellowed with age but the deputy-director has determined that he is a level-three risk and therefore it is inappropriate that you continue your liaison with him. You will call off your appointment tonight and cease all communications with this subject.’

The words hung in the air, the threat and finality in them undeniable.

‘Is that clear, Dr Crumpton?’

Crumpton merely nodded, too strong and proud to let the flood of tears that were threatening to stream down her face be seen by Nimrod. Seemingly satisfied with her response, Nimrod strode out into the corridor without a further word. The Forge had spoken. Crumpton could only stare at the kind, loving eyes of Bob Wilkins as they looked out from the computer screen.

Briefing

Forge Alpha Facility - Present Day

This briefing and any related files are top secret, classification four-two-one, eyes-only. Is that understood?' Crichton looked over his spectacles at the staff assembled in the briefing room and they all murmured their compliance. 'Very well, I'll now hand you over to Major Kirby.'

As Crichton stepped back to his own seat next to Crumpton, Frith looked at the tall, thin man who stood to take his place. He'd met Major Kirby a couple of times before and immediately liked him. He spoke his mind, didn't care who heard it, and wasn't afraid to let people know that he looked after his own.

When Crichton had announced that a special envoy had been dispatched from Whitehall, Frith had groaned inside. The last thing he needed was a suit boring them with endless, droning details when all they needed to know was: where was it, was it dangerous and did they have to go and get it? Kirby was the kind of officer who would tell them exactly that.

Aristedes sat to the right of Frith, with the heads of Ordnance, Cryptozoology and Computer Bio-Tech taking up the remaining chairs. Standing at the back of the briefing room, like the grim reaper on a coffee break, stood Nimrod, hands clasped behind his broad back. Crichton had stopped asking him to take a seat at meetings a long time ago.

'Thank you, Deputy-Director,' said Kirby, sweeping up a remote control and activating it. Behind him the briefing-room screen came to life, showing a satellite image of the Earth.

'As you are aware, a suspected alien spacecraft crash-landed in northern Scandinavia at 0948 hours this morning. This is a satellite image of the area, specifically the municipality of Utsjoki in the

province of Lapland.'

The image zoomed in and continents rushed up to greet them until the entire screen was filled with... that was odd. Frith tapped his teeth nervously with a pen. Oracle must be playing up. Usually the Forge's satellite images were pin-sharp, spotting a butterfly flap its wings at 500 miles, but the picture was swarming with electronic snow, obscuring the landscape beneath.

'From this, you can see we're having some difficulties with our observation satellites.'

'So you have no idea how big this thing is?' asked Crumpton, leaning in and trying to make anything out in the mess on the screen.

'I'm afraid not, Doctor. We have confirmed crash-site coordinates and the data we do have suggests a large mass, but otherwise we're flying blind on all counts.' It was now Crichton's turn to pose a question.

'What do we know for certain. Major?'

'Precious little, beyond what I've already told you, Deputy-Director. Thankfully it landed away from any of the nearby Sami settlements.'

Frith raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'Sami, sir?'

'Yes, quite right. Sergeant. I'd not heard of the blighters before all this business either,' Kirby replied before cocking his head to the ceiling. 'Oracle?'

'Standing by. Major.'

'Very good. What can you tell us about the Sami?'

The room felt silent for the shortest of moments as Oracle searched her database before cooing a response. Frith shifted in his seat. He knew why the powers-that-be had insisted that Oracle maintained a soft, female voice in order that technophobes like him wouldn't have a case of the screaming ab-dabs every time they had to converse with a bloody machine.

But why did she have to sound like a silky slip of posh totty? It reminded him too much of that bunny boiler he'd got himself lumbered with down in Brighton, it was almost as if Oracle's programmers had given it that accent just to wind him up. Nothing would surprise him around here.

'The Sami,' Oracle began, snapping Frith back to the matter in hand, 'are the indigenous people of Finland, Sweden, Norway and

northern Russia.'

'I thought they were called Lapps,' commented Frith to Aristedes, conjuring up a scrap of forgotten knowledge from his schooldays.

'Not for many years, Sergeant Frith,' corrected Oracle. 'The term Lapp is now considered derogatory by many of the Sami race.'

'Pardon me for breathing,' muttered Frith, drawing a smirk from Aristedes and a glare from Crichton.

'No apology for respiratory requirements needed, Sergeant Frith. May I continue?'

Feeling his cheeks redden. Frith sank a little lower in his chair.

'Please do, Oracle,' snapped Crichton, the look on his face telling Frith that he should keep his bloody mouth shut.

'The Sami are a class-seven civilisation. Originally a nomadic race, the Sami now reside in modern villages and, although many continue their traditional occupations such as reindeer farming, the majority of the Sami people have adopted traits of modern life.'

Windows appeared across the satellite map, displaying pictures of the Sami resplendent in traditional costumes. Frith's eye was caught by the image of a girl, hair swept back in a tight ponytail, proudly displaying a fish to the camera. Deep red tassels draped down over her chest from the multicoloured shawl that covered her shoulders, itself held together by an elaborate brooch, inwardly he scolded himself. Why had he been so shocked by what a pretty young thing she was? In his mind's eye he'd imagined a traditional yellow-skinned Eskimo, the kind of stereotype he'd seen in cartoons as a kid, but this lass wouldn't have looked out of place sitting behind the till in his local supermarket.

'Of the 100,000 Sami currently living,' Oracle droned on, 'the majority reside in their native territories known as the Samiid Ruovttiguovlo and constituting the three northernmost municipalities in the province of Lapland, namely Utsjoki, Inari and Enontekiö.'

'Where our xenotech crash-landed,' declared Nimrod from the back of room. Frith raised his eyebrows. Move to the top of the class, Dracula.

'Exactly,' Kirby confirmed. 'Now this Utsjoki place is pretty nasty - rolling tundra and nothing but ice and the odd arctic fox. We're lucky that that's where Johnny Martian or whatever it was decided to touch bottom. The biggest settlement is Utsjoki village, population 600. The

remaining people are scattered across the wastelands, knee-deep in snow. If the xenotech had come down in a built-up area we'd have lost it. This way, we doubt any more than a few of the Sami will have spotted it. Ours for the taking, unless Father Christmas is looking for a new engine for his sleigh.'

A ripple of polite laughter flowed around the briefing session as Crichton stepped forward.

'Thank you, Major,' he said, nodding in appreciation to the visitor before turning back to his team. 'We want whatever is salvageable in that crash. As the major has indicated, we are fortunate that we seem to be the only organisation that spotted it coming down.'

'Sure it didn't fly under the opposition's radar, sir?' inquired Frith. 'If the Yanks didn't see it, the Ruskies must have done.'

'Not as far as we're aware, Sergeant. Our satellite images, hindered though they are by the whiteout, have detected no activity in the area bar the usual comings and goings of the locals.'

Taking his eyes off Frith, Crichton looked to the back of the room.

'Nimrod, as senior field agent I am putting you in command of what will now be referred to as Project: Valhalla. You are now on the clock. Pick your team and be prepared to ship out by 2200 hours. This is a class-epsilon harvest. Salvage whatever you can and get it back here with as little contact with the resident population as possible. Whatever you can't carry back, destroy. We don't want any vultures picking over the titbits we left behind. Understood?'

'Perfectly,' came the monotonous reply.

'Excellent. Briefing dismissed.'

As the senior officers hurried out of the room. Frith looked at Aristedes in dismay.

'Project: Valhalla? Why can't we have a nice old-fashioned name like "Bedlam" or "Nightfire". You need a bloody encyclopedia around here.'

'I wouldn't worry about it, sir.' Aristedes said. 'Whatever name they assign, it always boils down to running around in the shadows with a big gun.'

'Well, as head of security here, I'm sorry I won't be coming with you.' Frith snorted, pushing back his chair and smoothing his uniform as he rose. He made to move but found Nimrod blocking his way. The hint of a smile tugged at the corners of the bloodless lips.

‘What’s so funny, Nimrod?’

‘Oh, nothing, Frith. Nothing.’ He calmly stepped around Frith and moved up to the briefing screen, tracing a gloved hand across the trajectory of the fallen ship. Aristedes and Frith watched him, before Frith shook his head and led the way out of the room.

Lapland - Present Day

His fingers trembled as they slammed down the keys of his trusted but practically antique typewriter. Doctor Jackiesson knew that one day he’d have to throw it out and invest in a PC, but for now he saw nothing wrong with two sheets of A4, some carbon paper and a set of neatly labelled foolscap wallets. At least crazy Magnus wasn’t the only old fool in the village holding onto the past.

Not that this was a report that he wanted to type. He’d been practising medicine in this area, travelling from one settlement to another, for nearly thirty years. He had lost count of the number of farmers he’d treated when one of their reindeer turned suddenly and gouged out an eye, but this was different. Even the strongest of stomachs would have gagged at what he’d seen in the last few hours.

He took another sip of the coffee that steamed in a mug beside the typewriter, wincing suddenly as the hot liquid burned its way into his stomach. He massaged his throat to ease the pain. He’d woken with a cough but had thought nothing of it, but now his throat felt red raw. He’d noticed that his wife, Ingrid, had started to cough too. There was definitely something going round, which meant he was going to be busy over the next few days.

Just get this finished, he thought, and I’ll treat myself to something a bit stronger than coffee. Heaven knew, he needed it.

The body was found in the early hours of this morning. Apparently one of the men discovered it when they stepped in the boy’s spilt entrails. I examined the body after it was brought to me by the sheriff at 10.00am. Otto’s parents identified what was left of their son at 10.45.

JACKIESSON SHOOK his head at the words he had just typed, squeezing the bridge of his nose to relieve a small build up of pressure that was doubtless going to bring on a headache.

In all my years I have never seen such wounds on a human body. Otto's attacker had ripped through his rib cage and torn each of the major organs completely clear of his torso. While most of his remains have been accounted for, we still haven't located his heart and spleen.

The most worrying aspect of this case is the absence of any evidence pointing towards an animal attack. I have examined the wounds and found no evidence of tooth or claw. I can only conclude that Otto Somby was torn apart by immensely strong but undoubtedly human hands.

THE DOCTOR SIGHED as he drained the last of his coffee. Today was getting longer by the second and he had a feeling that it would be quite a while before he tumbled into bed.

Hacking painfully, he returned to the report.

Mind of Evil

Forge Alpha Facility - 2002

Sharp, bright lights stabbed painfully through the darkness, wrenching Cassie from the mercy of oblivion.

She opened her eyes, flinching briefly from the glare of the lights, which were set into a stone ceiling, shining down on her, and she realised she was lying on a table. She tried to sit up, but straps across her chest and legs held her tight.

As she lay there, growing accustomed to her surroundings, Cassie felt a power running through her, strength flowing into muscles, flooding through veins, energising her. She hadn't felt this exhilarated for years, but with the renewed vigour came the hunger, a hunger that she knew she had to resist.

'I wouldn't be so cocky, Dr Smythe.'

Voices. This one was guttural, with a sharp, false edge to its cockney lilt.

'You're still trussed up like an oven-ready turkey, surrounded by vampires. Not looking too good, is it!'

Cassie recognised the arrogance in the voice. A man called Reggie Mead, the two-bit gangster vampire who ran the Dusk nightclub. Vampire. The word still felt ridiculous. Yesterday she would have laughed out loud at the thought. Today the time for laughter was definitely behind her.

Hunger violently swept through Cassie's system once again, marinading her senses, consuming her soul with an intoxicating lust. Her breathing grew desperate and she heaved against her restraints, longing to be free.

'Untie me!' she gasped, it felt like somebody else was saying the words, like she was watching the events played out in the movie of somebody else's life. 'I need to feed!'

She heard Reggie walk over and the straps slackened. Free, she sat up. Reggie's face leered in close, his breath hot on her face, the broken blood vessels cracked in a spider's web. Their eyes met and Cassie felt that she was staring into the dark recesses of his soul. Suddenly she knew exactly what to do.

Opposite, strapped to an identical operating table, lay a woman, mature in years, but her eyes, framed by greying hair, held a flash of youthful vitality. Evelyn Smythe stared back at Cassie and their eyes met, and she saw fear hiding behind the bravado.

'You never forget the first taste of blood,' Reggie whispered alluringly in her ear and Cassie looked hungrily at the prone Evelyn.

'Release her,' Cassie breathed, the need to feed knotting together in the pit of her stomach, combining with the sudden realisation that along with her new power she was now the strong one. She could be the cruel bully now. *'I want her to run. I want to feel her fear.'*

'You're a fast learner.' Reggie approved. Cassie flushed with pride, and the need to please her new teacher filled her with a sense of purpose. *'I can see you and me are going to get on just fine, darlin'.'* He grinned at her.

'Just do it!' Cassie hissed impatiently. Reggie obliged and moved to release Evelyn from her restraints. The old woman squirmed pathetically as Reggie's thick hands moved over her body, the gangster grinning down at her like the psycho she knew he was.

'Get it over with,' Evelyn cried out with a last breath of defiance. Reggie turned to face Cassie, his ruddy face sweating with eager anticipation.

'She's all yours, darlin'. Suck the old bird dry.'

Cassie stepped forward as her body cried out to be anointed with new lifeblood, but then hesitated. She looked in confusion from Evelyn to Reggie and back again. This wasn't right.

'What are you waiting for?' demanded Reggie.

'I... I don't know,' Cassie stammered. As she looked around the lab, the colour seemed to drain out of everything, seeping away to leave an unnatural, monochrome tint to her vision. Reggie grabbed her arm, but she felt no pain. She looked straight at him and saw that all the psychotic energy behind the eyes had gone.

'Kill her!' screamed the gangster, but all the power had gone, and even Evelyn's frightened protestations had lost all their urgency.

Everything had suddenly become two-dimensional.

Cassie threw her head back and screamed into the air. 'It didn't happen like this!'

Then the blackness came again.

CRUMPTON WATCHED through the observation window as Cassie's unconscious form tensed. She was strapped down to a gurney that had been wheeled into the holding cell, and electrodes were taped across her forehead, micro-filament wires snaking away to a tall bank of equipment. Every muscle in the young girl's body spasmed, her back arching against the heavy straps that bound her arms and legs.

Crumpton's expert eyes glanced quickly across the computer screen in front of her. She was worried that the girl's vital signs - the ones she had left, of course - were becoming too erratic, and the ECG monitor next to the computer scratched wildly from side to side.

To the doctor's great relief, Cassie relaxed back onto the gurney and her breathing became calmer. The ECG readings normalised and the frantic bleeping of the artificially amplified heart monitor settled down into a more gentle rhythm. Crumpton smiled grimly. How ironic that even after the ravaging changes Cassie's bio-system had suffered, she was still left with a beating heart. With a dark thought, she wondered if Nimrod still had one.

'She's stubborn,' growled Nimrod. He stood directly behind Crumpton, arms folded, staring intently into the holding ceil.

'It might help,' Crumpton commented, trying to keep the irritation from her voice, 'if you told me what you were trying to do. This equipment is still highly experimental, and I don't know how long her body will cope with the cocktail of drugs you've pumped into her.'

'Believe me, Doctor, you could dope her up with heroin and it would be like giving her an aspirin.'

'Well?' Crumpton swivelled her chair to face him, waiting for an explanation.

'To make Cassie more susceptible to our deeper brainwashing techniques,' began Nimrod, 'we are attempting, by direct stimulation of her cerebral cortex, to change her perception of key events in her life.'

'I'm not sure I...'

'To whit. Doctor, if I can make Cassie believe that something

happened differently, something that makes her perceive herself counter to her nature, it will make the brainwashing process less traumatic. I have been known to be, shall we say, brutal in the past.'

Crumpton didn't disagree. She turned back to regard Cassie, lips pursed in thought. 'That's a highly innovative approach,' she conceded. 'Fascinating, in fact. I mean, scientifically speaking

'I'm glad you approve. Dr Crumpton. You can write your paper on this later. If you're ready...'

Crumpton's shoulders tensed as she felt Nimrod move closer. She sighed and nodded. 'Ready.'

'Very well. Continue.'

Crumpton keyed a new sequence on the keyboard in front of her.

In the holding cell, Cassie's body tensed.

'She's all yours. Suck the old bird dry.'

Back in the Dusk.

Hunger overwhelmed Cassie as she sprung from the operating table, the straps that had restrained her ripping like paper. Strength coursed through her body. She hissed savagely, baring her teeth, fangs glistening with saliva.

She was a vampire.

Her head snapped round as somebody screamed. Evelyn Smythe writhed in fear on an identical operating table, whimpering like the pathetic old woman she was.

Muscles taughened and Cassie leapt across the laboratory, equipment scattering and clanging noisily to the floor.

Reggie Mead laughed hysterically as Evelyn cried out when Cassie landed on the end of the operating table. She moved up the table, stalking like a wild cat.

'That's It!' screamed Reggie. *'Do it!'*

Cassie reared up, her body crying out for sustenance, fangs shining in the fluorescent glare of the lights.

Then she fed.

CRUMPTON'S FACE contorted in fear as she watched Cassie rip aside the restraints strapping her down as if they weren't there. The doctor reached for the alert that would bring security running in a matter of seconds but a gloved hand grabbed her wrist, stopping her dead.

‘What are you doing?’ she spluttered. ‘She could break in here and kill us!’

Nimrod remained calm. ‘Keep watching.’

Through the observation window, Crumpton could see Cassie perched on the edge of the gurney like some dishevelled bird of prey. Her eyes were wide open, looking around intently, but a quick glance at her instruments showed the girl was still unconscious.

‘I don’t...’ Crumpton didn’t finish, her thought taken as Cassie lithely sprang from the gurney and pounced onto the large hunk of raw meat that still lay in the corner of the cell.

Crumpton caught a brief flash of dagger-sharp fangs before the girl sank them into the dead flesh. Blood spurted around her mouth as she ripped into the meat, tearing it apart to finally sate her hunger.

Crumpton’s fear was extinguished by the wave of disgust and nausea that washed over her. She knew exactly what Nimrod was, but this was the first time she’d come to face to face with true vampiric nature. Nimrod made sure he kept his inhuman existence as hidden as possible down in that filthy pit of his.

The worst thing about what she was witnessing was the look hidden beneath Cassie’s feeding. The girl was smiling.

As her feast continued, Crumpton turned away. ‘I’m not quite sure what just happened,’ she admitted.

Nimrod continued to look at his protégé crouched on the cell floor. ‘What we’re seeing is Cassie’s bodily response to our memory manipulation. We changed her history and her physical being is responding accordingly.’

Crumpton breathed out and made a note against the ECG readout, not sure what to think of this development. Was it strictly ethical? Come to that, did she even care?

Nimrod leaned over and pressed a sequence of keys on the keyboard. ‘I think we can proceed to the next stage.’

Fallen Star

Lapland - Present Day

The CrossFire thundered between his legs. For once, Jukka Somby derived no pleasure from his Arctic Cat, which he used to call his pride and joy. But that had all changed in the last 24 hours since his real pride and joy had been butchered out here on the tundra. The black-and-green aluminium beast suddenly didn't seem as important.

Jukka remembered the day he had first triumphantly rode the CrossFire into the village, the roar of its Suzuki 140-horsepower engine calling all to rubberneck and gawk as he cruised down the main stretch. They had swarmed around him like a gaggle of grubby schoolboys pressing their noses against the toy-shop window. The only man in the remote community who didn't seem impressed with the new purchase was Dunfeld, who had stood in the distance, shaking his head.

Unsurprisingly, Urso had been the first to run and admire the state-of-the-art snowmobile. Ever since the Sombys had moved to the village, Urso had followed Jukka around like a puppy and no one was shocked when the two farmers set up business, bringing their two herds together. Urso had never been a natural reindeer farmer and thankfully submitted to the persuasive strength of Jukka's argument.

He hadn't exactly bullied the smaller man into signing over the land rights, it had been a far subtler encouragement than that. Besides Urso hadn't done badly out of the partnership. There would have been no way that his family could afford the kind of equipment that Jukka had brought to the table. And one day, if he was lucky, he'd even let Urso ride the CrossFire - but not yet. He couldn't even be certain that Urso could handle it. He still had enough trouble controlling his antique Yamaha.

The two friends - because no matter what Jukka thought of his

partner, that's what they were - jerked and jostled side by side as their snowmobiles leapt over the rocks. They hadn't said a word for a good half-hour, travelling into the mountains in silence. Although Jukka had expected Urso to tag along in his wake - he always did - the larger man was glad to have his familiar shadow with him. The last day had passed like a blur and while he knew that he should be back at the house with his wife, some demon within pushed Jukka to be out here.

Where it had happened.

He didn't know what he expected them to discover, but all he knew was that if they did somehow stumble upon the monster that had... violated Otto, Jukka's rifle would bring justice to the tundra.

And so they rolled on. Early today, while stumbling back from Jackiesson's surgery, still reeling from what the doctor had told him and trying to work out how he was going to break it to Sofia, Jukka had been stopped by old Magnus. Usually he would have swept the old maniac aside like reindeer shit on his shoe, but there was something in the old man's eyes, a passion tainted by fear burning beneath the usual lunacy.

The cripple had gripped Jukka's shoulder with a stronger grasp than he would have given him credit him for and ranted about stars falling from the sky. For a minute Jukka had just stood there, unable to break away from the old timer's frantic gaze, the nonsense that spilt from his frothing mouth, words and phrases he'd not heard since he was a boy. Myths and legends come back to life. Angry spirits. Vengeful gods demanding tributes from a people who had denied them. Sacrifices on the ice.

Jukka hadn't meant to strike Magnus, but the sudden, primal anger that overcame him was too strong. When the fool talked of sacrifice, he was referring to Otto - his poor, little boy who was still cooling on the slab. In that moment, the seam of rage that had been welling up deep inside him from the moment the men of the village had begun their pilgrimage across the wasteland, searching for any sign of his lost child, became focused on one frail old man. He'd felt his nose shatter beneath his fist and heard the crack of brittle bones as he'd hit the dirt. He wasn't proud of the way he had kicked the cripple over and over again until he'd felt ribs give beneath the steel toecaps of his boots. It had given him no pleasure to leave Magnus wheezing in a heap on the floor before running back to the shed and firing up the

CrossFire.

But it had happened.

The CrossFire's suspension shuddered and the beam of the twin headlights lit the gloom beyond as Jukka realised where they'd ended up. In his fury he'd led them out in the direction of Magnus's mythical fallen star, the harbinger of doom the old man said he'd watched falling from the sky. His head spinning slightly, the cold night air clawing at his increasingly painful throat, Jukka cut the CrossFire's power and hit the brakes. Seconds later, Urso rolled up beside him.

'What is it, Jukka?' asked his friend. 'What have you seen?'

Jukka didn't reply but stared along the headlights' brilliance. There in the horizon, jutting out of the snow like an ebony gravestone, rose a massive wall of twisted metal. His mouth dropped slack as he regarded the monolith, his stomach somersaulting inside. Magnus had been right, the crazy old bastard, something had crashed out here on the plain, something that made his skin crawl.

Something that had caused Otto's murder.

He didn't know how he knew that, but he wasn't so far removed from his traditions for his instinct not to be piqued by such ominous events as these.

'Jukka,' whined Urso, still oblivious to the hulk on the horizon, 'can't we head back? Night's drawing in and I don't feel good. My guts feel like something's trying to dig its way out. I think I'm coming down with a bug.'

'Shut up, you idiot!'

'Hey! I know you're angry. God knows I understand that with all you've been through, but this isn't helping. You need to be with Sofia. She'll be worried sick.'

'Don't you see it?'

'See what?'

'That,' shouted Jukka, throwing his arm forward. Sighing, Urso looked to where he pointed and, finally, the scales fell from his eyes.

'What the hell is it?'

'Magnus's star.'

'Magnus's what? Are you sure you're feeling all right?'

Jukka had had enough. He threw Urso a barbed look before gunning the throttle and slamming the Arctic Cat forward, towards the jagged shape dominating the skyline.

Suited and Booted

Forge Alpha Facility - Present Day

The Forge hanger bay was alive with activity as Aristedes entered. The three refitted Merlins were standing, ready for u action, as squaddies and technicians loaded a never-ending stream of supplies and equipment into their bellies.

In the middle of it all stood Nimrod and Dr Crumpton, directing the symphony of ordered chaos with the skill of practised conductors. As she approached them, Aristedes couldn't help but spot the enthusiasm on Crumpton's face, that flush of eagerness that took hold every time the head of research was given a new project. It was what she'd grown to love about the older woman over the last few years. Yes, Edith adored playing the crotchety scientist, but beneath it all bustled a mind that leapt with joy every time a new discovery was about to be made. Like everyone working at the Forge, there was a sadness behind her eyes, and at times the sense of loneliness and loss seemed more pronounced than even for the likes of Frith. But while the sarge grumbled and complained, Crumpton lived for her job. Aristedes hoped that others said similar about herself.

Amazingly the doctor's zeal seemed to have rubbed off on Nimrod, who was the most animated she had ever seen him. The giant of a man, if that was what you could still call him, whirled and pointed in every direction, sending teams scuttling away to complete preparations, those brilliant blue eyes as piercing as ever. Amazingly, as Aristedes drew near, Nimrod even nodded an acknowledgement before returning his attention to his Personal Data Assistant.

'Good afternoon, Corporal,' offered Crumpton breezily, as if she was having the time of her life. Perhaps she was. 'And what can we do for you?'

'We've just received notice that the snow mobiles will be with us

within the hour.'

'Well, it's about time. What did Whitehall expect us to use? Huskies?'

'Administrative cock-up, apparently, but it's sorted now. Four state-of-the-art machines.'

'I suspect the formidable Corporal Aristedes of Department C4 shouting down the phone helped. Well done, young lady.' Crumpton turned her attention to the PDA in her hand. 'That's everything accounted for. We just need to get the BAN suits loaded up and we're good to go.'

'BAN suits?' asked Aristedes. Had she missed a briefing?

'Body-area-network suits,' explained Nimrod as he plucked a padded all-in-one jumpsuit out of the nearest storage crates. He threw it across to Aristedes and she examined the material, which was comfortingly warm to the touch. 'Conductive fibres are woven into the garment, transforming the entire suit into a computer network. Mobile communication, PDA functions and an uplink to Oracle are integrated into the material itself, meaning that you no longer have to lug a host of cumbersome devices around with you. Our urban field agents have been testing the standard BAN suit for some months, but this is our first opportunity to test the extreme-weather version that Crumpton's been developing.'

Aristedes ran her fingers along the smooth, snow-white nylon of the suit. 'Camouflaged too.'

'Exactly,' said Crumpton, picking up the impromptu lecture. 'These suits have been designed for use in the toughest conditions. Each features integrated global-positioning-system functionality, which can be viewed via the flexible user interface here.'

Like a proud parent, Crumpton turned over the arm of the suit to reveal a soft viewscreen, inset with various controls. Aristedes was impressed. This was the stuff she wanted when she signed up for C4, and finally she was getting her hands on some sexy hardware.

'And the experimental environmental controls?' queried Nimrod.

'Fully operational.' Crumpton beamed. 'The altitude and barometric sensors warn the wearer of changing weather conditions and body temperature, while geographical info and unit position can either be displayed on the screen or related via the standard earpiece. Obviously built-in digital cameras, face-recognition and heads-up-

display are integrated into the helmet visor as standard.'

Nimrod allowed himself a rare smile as he regarded the fruit of Crumpton's labours.

'Excellent work, Doctor. I'm almost sorry that I won't require one.'

'We couldn't leave you feeling left out and, as mission commander, you'll need to be slaved into the network. My team has upgraded your polycarbide armour to include the communication, GPS and barometric systems of the BAN suits. Just because you don't feel the cold, we wouldn't want you to be caught in the middle of a snowstorm.'

'How considerate.'

'The entire team's survival suits are wirelessly linked to your own cybernetic implants using both a 128-bit encrypted IEEE 802.11s network and satellite link-up. Hell, we've even thrown in Bluetooth just in case you need to synch your address book! You should be able to monitor the teams' status no matter where they - or you - end up.'

'I'm assuming I will still be able to maintain my direct link to Oracle.'

'Obviously. Don't leave home without it.'

'Good. We're almost ready. I hope you've remembered to pack your thermals, Doctor?'

Aristedes had often heard that Nimrod was always happier on an away mission, but the sound of him cracking a joke - no matter how feeble - made her skin crawl. She knew where she was with the moody, broody Nimrod complete with eagle eyes and realistic gripping hands. The cuddly Nimrod was another matter. She hoped something happened to piss him off again - and soon.

She should've been careful what she wished for.

'Oi, Nimrod! I want a word with you!'

On cue, his shoulders hunched in fury, Frith stomped across the hangar bay.

'What the bloody hell is this?' the sergeant fumed, thrusting a crumpled sheet of paper into the Nimrod's hands. He glanced down at it briefly.

'I thought someone of your experience would recognise new orders. Frith.'

'I do, smart arse. But why is my name on it? I'm head of Forge security, not some squaddie for one of your bollocking bug hunts. I

stay here and make sure everything's safe and sound while you run around the planet looking for your toys. That's how it works.'

'Not any more, Frith,' announced Nimrod, calmly folding the paper in half and passing it back to the fuming officer. 'With Corporal French's promotion and transfer to ICIS I need an experienced field commander to act as my second. Like it or not, Sergeant, that's you.'

'You are having a bloody laugh, mate. Wait until the old man hears about this.'

Nimrod smiled evenly. 'Your orders were approved by Deputy-Director Crichton ten minutes ago. And Nimrod held up a hand to silence the sergeant's next protest '- to head you off at the pass of another tedious discussion, the final addition to the team has just been ratified by the Director herself in Whitehall.'

'What?' Frith almost choked.

'Project: Valhalla will be Cassie's first mission as a fully active field operative of the Forge.'

Forge Alpha Facility - 2002

Lights exploded behind her eyes - a colourful, never-ending assault impacting across her retina. Cassie tried to swing the chair away from the barrage, but whichever way she turned the lights were always there. She tensed her hands against the bonds that bound her but her muscles felt sluggish, bloated even, the strength ebbing away on a cushion of light air.

The more she thought about it, the more Cassie realised she was feeling really good. Her body was suffused with well-being, like she was wrapped in a very comfortable blanket, even with the constant throbbing of the lights.

A whispering caught in her ears, hissing around the room. She could hear snatches of voices, some she even recognised, but she couldn't make out the words. And then, underneath it all, Nimrod. His voice was strong, cutting through the mass of whispering chatter, reassuring her in its confidence.

'Cassie, listen to me,' he boomed.

'I'm listening,' she slurred back, compelled to respond.

'You have no son. You have no one. The Forge is your family. Your only family.'

The voice receded, leaving her alone again, the darkness creeping in at the edges of her vision, blotting out the lights. But she knew she wasn't alone, she could never be alone when she remembered her little Tommy. Tommy, the son she'd left behind in Lancashire. The son she'd been forced to leave behind. Thrown out by her own mother, told to sort herself out before she came back for him.

A picture formed in her head, a picture on a sideboard in a scruffy bedsit in south London of a little boy, smiling the wide, innocent smile that only a three-year-old can. It was this image that kept her alive on those dark, cold nights in the Norwegian wastes. The memory of her little Tommy.

We are all you need. We are your family.

The picture of Tommy began to blur.

You are nothing without us, nothing without the Forge.

A tear pricked at the corner of her eye as the picture became smaller, receding away from her as if down a long tunnel.

Tommy is dead. Tommy never existed.

She couldn't see that smile any more; the picture was too small and too blurred. She tried to hold her hands out, to bring him back, to hug him tight to her and never let go, but the strength seemed to suddenly drain from her body, and with it went the last sliver of a cherished memory.

You are ours. We own you.

In Cassie's mind's eye, the picture of a three-year-old child called Thomas Hector Schofield disappeared into the blackness.

You never knew a boy called Tommy.

Death on Ice

Lapland - Present Day

Jukka gunned the CrossFire forward, gouging through the snow.

The air was alive and, the closer they got to the twisted heap of metal, every hair on his body stood on end. Electricity seemed to spark all around them and the atmosphere felt like it was fizzing. Just what was that thing pumping out? He wondered with a jolt of horror if it could be some kind of missile.

Jukka still didn't know what he was doing here, and couldn't work out why he wasn't fleeing in the opposite direction to tell the village of their discovery. Next to him, astride his own vehicle, Urso sat silently, face whiter than usual, his tongue lolling out like a hungry dog. Jukka couldn't blame him for feeling quiet, this thing they were approaching was a daunting spectacle, and its bulk seemed to swallow up any sound, deadening the harsh drone of their engines.

At first, Jukka had thought that the jagged mass was constructed from a dull, matt substance but the nearer they got he realised that the metallic skin of the craft was glittering with thousands upon thousands of tiny lights flickering every colour of the rainbow. Green, red, yellow, orange, jiggling about like bulbs shorting out on a Christmas tree.

The snow beneath their tracks was now blackened and mixed with the rocks and mud that must have been driven to the surface on impact. A solid wall of metal came up fast and Jukka slammed on the brakes, plumes of sludgy black snow flying up before him.

As Urso drew up beside him, Jukka jumped from the Arctic Cat, stumbling a little on the fused rock beneath his feet.

'I don't think we should be doing this,' said Urso. 'This thing doesn't look safe. We need to get back and call someone. The sheriff or the hospital.'

‘The hospital? Is someone sick?’

Urso clawed subconsciously at his throat and appeared to be in discomfort. ‘We might be if we don’t get away. Who knows what’s inside this thing.’ His face suddenly brightened. ‘The army,’ he announced triumphantly. ‘We could call the army.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ sneered Jukka. ‘Use your head, you idiot.’

‘I am and it’s telling me to get the hell away from here!’

Jukka raised a gloved hand and brushed it against the wall of metal that rose high above them. ‘Don’t let me stop you.’

Urso leapt forward, pulling Jukka’s arm away. Angrily, the larger man twisted around and pushed his partner away from him. Urso’s head cracked against the metal, which immediately sparked. Urso yelped, more in surprise than pain, and fell into a crumpled heap in the mud.

‘What did you do that for?’ he yelled, rubbing his head with both hands.

‘Me?’ thundered Jukka. ‘You’re the one who jumped forward. I thought you’d gone crazy.’

‘I was trying to stop you touching it. We didn’t know what it would do.’

‘We do now,’ Jukka acknowledged, holding out his hand to help his friend up. ‘How’s your head?’

‘Bleeding!’ came the angry reply. ‘And it smells like my hair was on fire.’

‘Let me look.’

Removing his gloves, Jukka carefully pushed aside Urso’s matted mop of hair. The blood was blackened around the gash, which wasn’t as bad as his whinging made out.

‘You’ll live,’ Jukka said, turning back to the metal.

‘Can we go now? This thing is dangerous.’

‘Shut up, Urso. We’ll have a look at this thing and then head back. We need to know more about it before we go yelling to the sheriff. He’ll just think we’re crazy otherwise.’

Still rubbing his head, Urso rolled his eyes. ‘All right, but ten minutes, that’s all.’

‘Sure,’ Jukka said, reaching down for a broken branch by his feet. ‘Ten minutes.’

‘Now what are you doing?’

Stepping back, Jukka reached out with the branch, and pushed it out towards the metal. With a dull, solid clang, it met the surface and scraped across the side. No blue flash. No sudden shock. Nothing.

‘You must have shorted it out, discharged it somehow,’ noted Jukka with relief.

Cold sweat was glistening across Urso’s face. ‘I really think we should go,’ he said, a hint of panic rising in the pitch of his voice.

‘You need to get some backbone, that’s your problem, Urso.’

Urso began walking back to his snowmobile, and Jukka turned his back on the hulk to watch him go.

‘Oh, come on. I was only joking.’ He held out his arms in apology. ‘You really need to develop a sense of humour.’

Urso threw his legs over the seat of his vehicle and looked back at his friend, but his eyes widened and he slowly raised a hand to point behind Jukka. ‘That wasn’t there before.’ he stammered.

‘What are you...’ Jukka turned to look where Urso was pointing, and had to step back in surprise. Seconds before, where there had been smooth, black metal, a gap had appeared, a single tear in the fabric of the wall, revealing a gloomy corridor within. There had been no sound or warning, just the sudden appearance of a... door?

‘That’s it.’ shrieked Urso. ‘This is getting too weird. You stay if you want, but it’s your funeral. You know me, Jukka, I’ll follow you to the ends of the Earth, but this...’

Jukka span round as a sudden blast of hot air slammed out from somewhere behind him. He crouched down in the sludgy snow, looking up and across the wall of metal, looking for the source of the blast. ‘Did you feel that?’ he asked, turning back to Urso.

But he wasn’t there.

The Yamaha still sat there, but there was no sign of Urso. One second he had been there, gibbering away, the next...

Jukka’s hands began to shake as he cupped them round his mouth, yelling his friend’s name out into the encroaching darkness. If he was out there running, he’d still be able to hear the stupid fool. Creeping dread began to knot in the pit of his stomach and travelled up his spine. Something bad had just happened to Urso. The world stood still, and out of the corner of his eye Jukka spotted a blur as something scuttled - or should that be flowed - into the ruined ground behind him.

Jukka sprinted for the CrossFire. In one movement he leapt onto the seat and throttled the engine. Damn it! Why didn't it fire? He tried again, all the time glancing around with strained eyes. The engine refused to fire again. He tried again and again, but the engine of his beloved CrossFire stayed silent.

Panicking, Jukka tumbled his way off the Cat and staggered towards Urso's Yamaha. He knew that, whatever his friend's fate, he wouldn't be needing his ride. There was no way Jukka Somby was going to be next. Whatever it was out here, it wasn't going to tear him apart.

Perching himself on the bike he turned the ignition. Mercifully, the engine fired. He breathed out in relief. He was safe.

He revved the engine.

THERE WAS a thud as something slick and fleshy sliced through Jukka's face. A spray of scarlet and grey erupted from the back of his skull and his lifeless body slapped across the handlebars of the snowmobile, the angry buzz of the engine still calling out into the night.

The End of Innocence

Dartmoor - 2002

‘Are you sure this is the right way, love?’ called John, looking up into the rain that was spraying his face. Turning away from the icy onslaught, he frowned at his laminated map.

‘Of course it is, John,’ said Patricia, jogging up enthusiastically at his side, face pink and flushed with exhilaration. ‘We’ve walked this part of the moor dozens of times. Don’t you recognise it?’

Scratching the back of his neck, John gazed around their surroundings. How do you tell your wife after five years together that you hated these hiking holidays she insisted coming on year in, year out. What was wrong with two weeks in the Bahamas, drinking rum and Coke on the beach? He really must love her to agree to spending another week on Dartmoor, up to his knees in mud.

Even though John wasn’t the most enthusiastic hiker in the world, Patricia was right. He’d picked up enough over the years that he should have instantly recognised a couple of landmarks, but there was nothing. No familiar rock formation, no ancient tree pointing the way with a gnarled branch. He glanced at the map again.

‘Wait up, love,’ he called out to the disappearing form of his wife, ‘we’ve definitely made a wrong turn.’

Pat turned and made her way back to his side, her glasses glistening in the failing light.

‘Are you sure?’ she said, peering over his shoulder as he circled in an attempt to get his bearings. ‘We should be coming up to the Black Hound, just over the rise.’

John shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. Look, we should’ve turned down this path here, but instead we carried on over this field.’

Pat followed her husband’s fingers before glancing up at the heap of granite that dominated the horizon. ‘That isn’t Grimpen Tor?’

‘Not by my reckoning. If I’m right then we’re somewhere around...’ Pat turned back to John as his voice trailed off.

John looked at her and sighed. ‘We’re miles out, love. That’s not Grimpen, it’s Lynch Tor.’

‘Lynch?’ repeated Pat quizzically. ‘Don’t think I know that one. Let me have a look.’

She snatched the map from his hands and began poring over it, her head tilting like an inquisitive bird. Actually, thought John, where were all the birds? They hadn’t seen or heard any animals for the last couple of hours. How odd.

‘Look,’ he said, pointing at the map. ‘There it is. Lynch Tor.’

‘But we’re miles out,’ said Pat.

‘That’s what I’ve been saying. And that’s not all...’ His finger ran around the red border that marked off a great chunk of the moors, the area that included Lynch Tor. Realisation dawned on his wife’s face and her shoulders sagged under the weight of her pack.

‘We’re in the military training zone.’

‘Yup.’

‘But there wasn’t a sign or any fencing.’

‘I’m not surprised we missed it. This rain’s been coming down pretty hard.’

The joy had gone out of his wife’s expression. She didn’t like admitting mistakes, especially not out here.

‘We’d better get out of here. We don’t want to get fined. Or arrested.’

Pat turned to her left and pointed out to a stream in the distance. ‘If we head in that direction we should come out on this road here,’ she said, referring to the map again. ‘That should bring us back to Chudford and we can stop for a drink before we try to work out how we’re going to get back to the car.’

‘Sounds like a plan to me, love,’ John said gently, quietly slipping his wife’s hand into his own. ‘Come on, let’s get...’

The sight of a uniform stopped them in their tracks before they’d taken another step. The man, dressed from head to toe in combat fatigues, had popped up from behind some shrubbery. He was soon joined by four more, all emerging from different hiding places. They must have been there all the time, listening to everything. John’s grip tightened on Pat’s hand as he realised what they were carrying. ‘John,’

said Pat weakly. 'They've got guns.'

'I can see that. It's all right, they'll probably just ask us to move on, it's fine. Just stay calm.'

A voice blared across the moor, obviously piped through a speaker. 'Stay exactly where you are! This is a restricted area. State your names and reason for being here!'

John cleared his throat, unconsciously raising his arms into the air, Pat's fingers slipping from his.

'We're just lost, that's all. Need to be pointed in the right direction and then we'll be on our -'

It came out of nowhere, leaping across the slick grass like a wild animal. For a second, John thought it was a big cat but then he realised, with some level of terror, that it was human, a girl. But the way she was moving...

Patricia screamed and before he could stop her, she began to run. 'Pat!' he called after her, but she didn't listen. The girl looked straight at John, her eyes shining, and his stomach turned when she actually grinned at him. A cruel, twisted grin. And then she was gone, sprinting away after Pat. All John could do was watch and listen as the voice boomed from the speakers around them.

'Cassie,' it bellowed, 'hold your position. Repeat, hold position!'

As Pat ran, the girl circled round her, changing her direction second by second. She was stalking her. And then, just as it seemed Pat might get away, the taunted figure of the girl snapped around, and went straight for the fleeing figure like a homing missile. John yelled out again, praying for his wife to stand still and surrender, but it was too late. In seconds, the girl was on her.

At first John thought she would just pin Pat down. The last thing he expected was to see his wife thrown through the air like some discarded toy. The girl had just grabbed Pat and chucked her into the air. There was no scream from Pat as she slammed onto the ground with a sickening crunch of bones.

One of the soldiers took up position next to John, his rifle trained on him. John realised he still had his arms raised, and all he could do was keep them in the air as he watched the scene unfold below. The girl leapt to where Pat had landed in a heap of twisted waterproofs, snaked a sinewy arm around her thin neck and...

John crashed to his knees, bile rising in his throat. That hadn't just

happened, couldn't have... This was a dream. A minute ago they'd been bickering about being lost and now... now he'd just watched his wife's lifeless body snapped apart like a twig. A whirlwind of shouting and screaming whipped around him as more soldiers piled out of nowhere. He saw the girl drag away his wife's corpse, but all John could think about was the smooth pint of Guinness he was going to enjoy when he finally got to Chudford.

A rifle barrel pressed into the back of his neck. 'Down!'

John did as he was told and collapsed to the floor, the mud cold against his face as he turned to look in the direction of his wife's body. He heard booted feet scrunching their way over the terrain.

'Sarge,' acknowledged a voice.

Somebody breathed out wearily and, aside from the rain pattering across the back of John's waterproof jacket, there was a few seconds of silence.

'Do it.'

Then everything went black.

NIMROD LOOKED up from the PDA screen as Cassie was shoved into the room by Frith. Luckily for Frith, Cassie didn't resist, or he'd have a broken arm by now. Taking a sharp intake of breath, Nimrod placed the device back on his desk and looked up into the angry eyes of the head of security.

'Can I help you, Sergeant?'

'Have you read the report?'

'Yes, Frith. Most evocative. Your grasp of descriptive prose is truly breathtaking.'

'Don't piss me around. Nimrod. I'm not in the mood for jokes.'

Nimrod leant back, weighing up the situation. He'd never seen Frith this mad and would have to tread carefully.

'I never joke about my work.'

'Neither do I,' replied Frith.

'Frith,' began Nimrod, still not looking at Cassie, who stood defiantly against the wall, 'while I understand these events are unfortunate...'

'Unfortunate?' shouted Frith, spittle flying from his lips. 'Tell that to the new widower we've got sitting downstairs. I'm sure he'll understand.'

‘Is the situation under control?’

‘Of course It is. He’s been doped up to the eyeballs and taken off to Section H for damage control. He’ll be released in a couple of days and probably spend the rest of his life thinking he went nuts on Dartmoor and killed his wife.’

‘Regrettable’.

‘Not half, you inhuman son of a bitch. Security is my responsibility, not yours and definitely not hers!’ Frith jabbed a finger in Cassie’s direction. ‘I’ve dealt with hundreds of lost tourists over the years, and I’ve never had to order a body bag.’

‘Learn from it, Frith. Move on. Your report is filed, the director is satisfied. There is nothing more to say.’

Frith glowered. ‘For some reason, Crichton’s protecting you and your little pet and is sweeping this under the carpet. But I’m warning you...’

‘Yes, Sergeant?’

‘Keep away from me and control your bitch.’

‘Or?’

‘Or I’ll do it for you. Clear?’

Nimrod smiled charmingly. ‘Perfectly.’

Frith turned and stalked from the room, the door snapping shut behind him.

The clock on the wall of Nimrod’s office ticked its way through the seconds as he pushed his chair away from the desk and rose. Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock.

Silently he walked around to face his young charge. She stared back defiantly. She had gone too far and she knew it. He would deal with that later but for now...

Tick.

‘You thought you were doing the right thing?’ he asked, fixing her in the eye.

‘Yes, sir,’ she snapped back.

Tock.

‘And you realise that your action wasn’t appropriate.’

Tick.

‘I do.’

Tock

‘And even though you considered the best course of action was to

take a life, you had no compunction in doing so?’

Tick. Cassie straightened where she stood.

‘No, sir. None at all.’

Tock.

Nimrod regarded her, the little girl brimming with arrogance and eagerness, not the broken creature he had found cowering in the Norwegian wastes.

Tick.

‘You’re ready.’

Night Flight

Lapland - Present Day

Doctor Jackiesson wiped his mouth with the dirty rag. Surely he couldn't be sick any more. There was nothing in his lurching stomach to dislodge. All the retching was bringing up was thick, crimson phlegm. Wheezing, he lay back into his sweat-soaked sheets. It was so hard to breathe now, every gasp feeling like shards of glass tearing through his lungs.

He stared up to the ceiling, willing the walls to stop warping before his eyes. Surely they never used to spin and swirl like that before? He couldn't be sure any more, of that or anything about life before the sickness, if he was perfectly honest with himself he couldn't even remember what normal life was. Had there been a time when it didn't feel like his brain was trying to crawl out of his skull and that his guts were steady and firm? He thought he could see himself helping other people, even those who didn't trust the new medicines, but of course that could have been a delusion. Perhaps there had always been the fever and the vomiting and the sweat and the soiled bed. The memories he had of comforting the families of the first members of the community to get sick were probably just the ravings of his fevered mind. If he were a doctor, then why was he in this state? If he were trained in the ways of medicine he would have been able to treat his neighbours and he wouldn't have had to leave Ingrid breathing her last as he coughed up his own guts. Sometimes he didn't know who he was anyway, so who's to say that he hadn't made it all up. But it would all be okay in the morning. Everything would seem right again. Everything in its right place. Everything making sense.

Morning had to come soon, didn't it?

Didn't it?

Perhaps it wouldn't come. Perhaps it had never come before?

Perhaps there was no such thing as morning and the night never ended. After all, where was the evidence that the blackness would lift today? The pain wasn't ending. The sounds from outside weren't ending. The shouts. The cries. Glass breaking. Women wailing. Why wouldn't they stop wailing? Didn't they know they didn't have time to stop wailing. No one did. No, they had to get moving, complete their mission. Yes, that's what they had to do. Complete the mission.

More phlegm slapped against the polished floorboards. Jackiesson swore through the muck that lined his mouth. What was he babbling about now? His only mission was to break through this fever and get going the next day. The village would need him. His wife would definitely need him. She was ill, wasn't she? He couldn't remember. But it would get better. It had to.

Shaking, Jackiesson let himself flop back. He'd just rest for a moment then get up and give his brother a call. He'd heard a rumour earlier today - at least he thought it was today - that the virus had reached the next village. Anders would know what to do and they could work together. Two heads were better than... well, they were better than something, that's all he knew.

Yes, rest was what he needed now. Nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Jackiesson closed his eyes as the sound of his front door splintering open shot through the house. He was far too busy dying to care.

Forge Alpha Facility - Present Day

Nimrod strode along the Merlin's gangway. 'Make sure you're all strapped in, we're ready for take-off.'

Whatever you say, Lestat, Frith thought as he checked his own restraints. It was bad enough that he'd been roped into this wild-goose chase, now he had to endure a rocky journey in the presence of hunter boy and his pet freak. Across the way, Cassie was absorbing the field data from her suit's display. God, she actually looked like she was enjoying all this, eager to get out there out there and kick alien butt. If she kept this up she would be the new Forge poster girl. He could see her podgy face staring out of a sodding photo in the staff canteen. 'Forge Employee of the Month: Cassie Schofield.' Well, at least it would make for a good dartboard.

Nimrod swung himself into a chair at the front of the cabin and jabbed a button with one gloved finger.

‘Pegasus One ready for embarkation. Report.’

Aristedes’s voice crackled over the radio. Frith’s frown grew deeper. If he had to spend hours flying through turbulence he’d much rather feel airsick in the presence of the corporal, but, no, instead he had to endure the smug smirk of Crumpton as she watched him trudge up the gangplank after Nimrod. How did he draw the short straw on this one, anyway?

‘Pegasus Two standing ready and able, sir.’

‘Pegasus Three ready, sir,’ added Private Dann from the third chopper. ‘Just waiting for the word.’

‘Then the word is given, Private. Let’s get this show on the road. Ops, requesting permission for take-off.’

‘You are cleared for take-off, Pegasus One,’ came the clipped voice of Crichton across the radio. ‘Godspeed, Nimrod.’

God will have precious little to do with it, thought Frith as the Merlin lurched and began its climb into the Dartmoor air. Above the whup-whup-whup of the rotors, Nimrod shouted instructions to the assembled soldiers.

‘ETA,’ he finally concluded, ‘24 hours.’

‘Brilliant, two hours of in-flight then,’ Frith quipped, drawing a grin from the private sat beside him before turning his attention to the new recruit. ‘I hope you remembered to pack the Travel Scrabble, Cassie.’

The only response he received was a look that would freeze the planet’s core. Yup, he thought as he closed his eyes and longed for sleep to take him, it’s going to be a long journey.

THREE DARK SPLODGES swept through the night air above the dwelling, the three Merlins slicing their way through the darkness. They passed overhead, running lights extinguished, a brief clatter of noise shattering the silence.

And then they were away.

The helicopters’ route was observed by a man standing in a shaft of yellow light at the door of the farmhouse, a steaming cup of coffee clutched in his hands. He followed the progress of the choppers until, hugging the contours of the undulating terrain, they disappeared,

helicopters and night merging into one. The man turned and looked into the kitchen, where a woman sat at a wooden table, surrounded by tracking equipment. The smooth sweep of a radar screen was showing three blips which, at that second, winked out of existence. The man nodded at the woman, who keyed a sequence on the laptop keyboard in front of her before speaking into the lip mic that snaked round from her ear.

‘Nestwatcher to Oracle. Come in.’

The reply was immediate. ‘This is Oracle. Go ahead, Nestwatcher.’

‘Blackbirds have flown the nest. Repeat. Blackbirds are away.’

‘Acknowledged, Nestwatcher. Oracle out.’

The man drained his coffee and threw the dregs out into the yard, before closing the door, shutting off the light.

Bailing Out

Frith screwed up his eyes as Pegasus One lurched to the side, righting itself almost immediately as the pilot wrestled with the controls up front. He looked around the darkened hold of the Merlin, lit only by the glow of a small bank of screens near the cockpit. Cassie stood over the station operator, examining the data flowing across the various readouts with bright, attentive eyes. Twenty or so soldiers took up the rest of the space, strapped in for the ride, the dulled thudding of the chopper's rotor blades pounding above them.

The pitch of the engines changed again as they strained against more turbulence, the entire craft lurching sickeningly once again. Beside Frith, Private Dann's face coloured a deeper shade of green.

'Here,' said Frith, passing the lad a stick of white gum. 'This'll help steady your nerves. And your guts for that matter.'

Despite his obvious airsickness, Dann eyed the gum with suspicion.

'What does that do, sir?' he asked, his voice betraying how his stomach actually felt. 'Alter our DNA so we can cope with turbulence?'

'No, soldier,' replied Frith with a grin. 'It gives you minty fresh breath.' He cheerfully popped a squashy stick into his own mouth.

'Don't worry, it's common-or-garden chewing gum. Guaranteed no Forge additives.'

Dann took the stick gratefully, folded it in half and put it in his mouth. The look on his face told Frith he'd rather be eating a cockroach, but, then, could you blame him? You could never be sure of anything around here.

Nimrod emerged from the cockpit doorway, his dark shape seeming to fill every available inch of space in the cramped conditions. The chatter of radio traffic between Pegasus One and the other two Merlins flying either side of them could be heard from up front, where a lone pilot remained at his post.

‘We just entered Lapland airspace, sir,’ Cassie reported from her station. ‘ETA: 19 minutes. The fuel cells are performing well.’ ‘Excellent,’ acknowledged Nimrod, striding down the gangway of the craft just as the Merlin hit another pocket of air. He didn’t even flinch, pausing only to open a channel to Pegasus Two.

‘Doctor Crumpton’, he barked into the air. ‘How are you enjoying the ride?’

‘Having the time of my life,’ came her reply, a hint of static creeping in at the edges. ‘I feel like a tossed salad.’

‘What do you make of this turbulence? I’m assuming we’re experiencing the same conditions that caused the satellite white-out?’

‘You assume right. We’re just at the edges of its scope, but this is no ordinary turbulence. Our systems are going haywire. And it will get worse the closer we get.’

‘Recommendations?’

‘It’s far too dangerous to get much nearer the crash site of the xenotech. I suggest we land as soon as possible and recalibrate our instruments to compensate for the interference. Otherwise we’ll be flying blind in more ways than one.’

The chopper lurched again as if on cue. Next to Frith, Dann put his head in his hands, groaning slowly to himself.

Nimrod glanced at Frith and the sergeant nodded his agreement. ‘I think we all concur, Doctor. We’ll identify a landing site immediately. Pegasus One out.’

Frith twisted to glance out of the window behind him. Beneath them the white blanket of snow and ice rolled by.

‘We shouldn’t have too many problems landing, but let’s make sure it’s nice and solid, eh?’ he directed towards Nimrod. ‘I don’t want to find myself taking a dip in a frozen lake.’

‘Absolutely, Frith. The pilots know what they’re doing.’

Frith saw Cassie’s face fall. ‘So we keep circling until we find somewhere safe?’ she asked. Frith could see her practically straining at the leash to get out of the chopper. It was bad enough they were cocooned in these stupid BAN suits, although Cassie probably needed it more than any of them, thanks to her inability to tolerate the sunlight. The suit should keep her nice and safe, and as long as Nimrod kept his caged animal under control, he didn’t really care.

‘Standard procedure, love. Sorry.’ Frith was anything but sorry.

Cassie scowled at him, before pulling down the protective visor of her suit's helmet and beginning to move towards the main hatch embedded in the side of the craft.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' demanded Frith. The suit sealed around the rim of Cassie's helmet with a series of clicks and hisses of compressed air. 'Sit yourself down and strap in.' He began to move towards her as she made for the hatch release.

Frith looked at Nimrod for support but the large man looked on impassively, a teacher assessing a star pupil.

Cassie's voice was a muffled electronic rasp as it piped through the mouthpiece speakers. She sounded like Nimrod. 'If you want a landing site, I'll find us a landing site.'

She turned to the hatch release controls.

'Schofield, stand down!' snarled Frith, beginning to unbuckle himself from his seat.

Before he was out of his chair, however. Cassie had entered the four-digit code into the interface and the door on the side of the Merlin had clunked open. Piercing streams of cold air rushed into the cabin and the chopper lurched at the slight change in air pressure. Frith swore as he lost his footing and went down on one knee. Cassie turned briefly to him, delivered a cheeky little wave and flung herself from the rapidly moving chopper.

CASSIE HUNG in the air for a split second, arms outstretched, her body enjoying the sudden leap into freedom. She felt the mass of the Merlin blasting away from her, keeping formation with the other two choppers, and then she was falling through the air, its freshness pumped into the helmet of her BAN suit.

They hadn't been flying high, keeping low to avoid detection by prying electronic eyes, and the white mass of Lapland rushed up to meet her. Cassie's muscles tensed and, at the last second, instinct took over and she flipped over, landing gracefully in a mound of icy snow. Had she been a normal human, she'd have broken most of the bones in her body on impact, but her vampire constitution had no problems with that much physical exertion.

The sun glinted low on the horizon and the visor of her BAN suit tinted automatically, in the distance she could still make out the dots in the sky that were the rapidly moving Merlins. Cassie threw back

her head as she imagined the look that would be creasing Frith's face right about now. As she took in her surroundings, the dull thud of a distant heartbeat filled Cassie's mind and she felt a familiar telepathic probing at the edges of her conscious thought. Nimrod. Never far from her thoughts.

Ignoring the wave of nausea their mental contact always brought, Cassie relaxed and gave herself to his contact. And as she responded she could almost see his dark, oppressive form hanging like a malignant spectre at the corner of her vision.

'Cassie, where are your manners?' he echoed all around her. 'You should have asked Sergeant Frith before you left the table in such a hurry.'

'I'll send him a bunch of flowers.' She pushed back out towards him. 'I wouldn't have missed that for the world.'

'Your impulsive streak will be your undoing. You must learn to control it, shape and direct your energy into more constructive uses.'

'Yeah, all right, I get it, is the lecture over?'

'We'll talk later,' came the brusque reply, 'in the meantime, we've located a landing site. Your BAN suit's tracer will guide you to us.' Nimrod's voice evaporated on the wind and, as the connection broke, the sound of distant heartbeats faded with it. The cloying envelope of telepathic contact lifted, leaving Cassie with just the sound of her own breathing inside her damn helmet. She brought her forearm up and looked down at the screen moulded into the fabric of her sleeve. She watched as the three red triangles symbolising the progress of the Merlins came to a halt, indicating that they had touched down. The display was swiftly replaced by a GPS map of the immediate area, her quickest route to the landing site some five miles away already worked out. A light afternoon stroll for somebody with her strength and stamina.

With a whoop of delight she leapt forward. For a brief second, she thought about releasing the seal on her helmet so she could feel the sharp air on her face, but the glare of the sun would have burnt her to a crisp in seconds. As she ran, she could feel the past slipping away. None of it could touch her now. The old Cassie could never have coped with all these new experiences, and would have crumpled into a sobbing heap at the first sign of trouble. Just like that fateful night at the Dusk.

What would Mam make of her now, she thought as she jumped with graceful ease across a frozen river. There'd be no more accusing looks cast in her direction, no criticism, no... disappointment. How would she look on her daughter now? With pride? Admiration, perhaps. Or even fear? Yes, Cassie liked that the best.

She pounded forward, plumes of snow thrown up in her wake, and jumped lightly from a small rise, coming to a halt in a low crouch. She scanned her surroundings, sniffing the air that filtered through into her helmet. There was something out there...

An arctic hare hopped into view from behind a scrub of bush, looking around through wide, perpetually startled eyes. The creature stood on its hind legs, sniffing the air. Had it sensed that she was there?

A thought hit Cassie, and she smiled. She'd never tried this before...

Gently, she pushed outwards with her mind, focusing her telepathic sense down towards the oblivious hare. The heartbeat came up, filling her thoughts, and then she felt another presence. It was small, and where usually there were words, now there were only sensations, colours, smells. Cassie felt like she could bolt across the snow and run wild forever.

And then she came back to herself, enjoying the feeling of touching an animal mind. She pushed out further, planting an instinct at the center of the hare's timid consciousness. The animal spasmed for a second, as if all its nerve endings were firing at once, before it bolted with a piercing shriek of terror.

Cassie grinned in cruel fascination as she watched the animal disappear into the sparse undergrowth. She'd have to try it on some...

The scream exploded from behind her eyes, filling her world with pain and panic. Swaying under a sudden crushing force of emotion, she fell to the ground. She heaved and retched, her stomach lurching as she tried to fight the images flooding her eyes, images that didn't belong to her. A whole city of people crying out in unified terror, fear brimming over as a scarlet shadow bled across their lives. All living creatures engulfed with palpable dread.

Chaos.

Horror.

Death.

Slowly, the wave of emotion receded, leaving Cassie gulping for breath, a feeling of loneliness spreading from the pit of her stomach. It felt as if her consciousness had just been raped, the violation leaving a taste of bile in her mouth.

As she struggled into a sitting position, she felt a sudden sense of guilt about what she had done to the hare. Had Nimrod punished her for some reason? No. He was fastidious in his manners towards telepathy, and even he wasn't that sadistic.

As Cassie hauled herself to her feet and began to make her way towards the landing site, one thought dominated everything. Whatever had just invaded her mind was utterly alien.

Dead Town

Why couldn't you have crashed in the Bahamas?' muttered Crumpton under her breath as she shifted her weight from \ one foot to the other in an attempt to keep warm.

'Did you say something, Dr Crumpton?' asked Private Dann, who was standing next to her in the shadow of Pegasus Two. Equipment was being manhandled down the rear cargo ramp of the Merlin by a handful of soldiers, and Dann, keen to impress, was helping Crumpton supervise. Pegasus One and Three nestled not far away, starkly black against the white of the area in which they had touched down.

'Ignore me, Private. I detest the cold and have a habit of talking to myself. You'll get used to it.' Dann gave her an awkward nod of understanding, before returning his attention to the screen embedded in the left sleeve of his BAN suit, checking off the equipment manifest on its touch-sensitive surface.

Crumpton looked at her own display - it read the exterior temperature at -15C. It was always somewhere cold and bleak. Why not a nice beach somewhere? She dismissed the image of Nimrod wearing a Hawaiian shirt and handing drinks round under a palm tree as quickly as it popped into her head. Maybe a cold tundra was for the best after all.

'Doctor? Is everything okay?'

Crumpton shook herself from her thoughts. Dann had paused again, looking at her. He clearly thought she was unhinged from the look in his eyes.

'Yes' she said sharply, forcing a smile. 'You're doing a great job there. Well done.'

Sighing, Crumpton turned from the confused private and began to walk briskly across to Pegasus One.

SO WHAT ARE the neighbours like, Frith?'

Frith grimaced silently before continuing to type at the keyboard of the chunky field laptop perched precariously on his knees. When would Nimrod learn that he just couldn't do humour?

'Distinctly absent,' he replied, bringing a map of the area up on the screen. 'I know it's not exactly urban around here, but I think we've just moved into a ghost town. The nearest village is five miles away, but our initial intel-sweeps have shown negative on all counts. Even had a gander at it myself through Crumpton's souped-up binoculars, but couldn't see anything other than a load of very lonely looking buildings.'

'No life signs at all?' asked Nimrod, frowning.

Nobody home. I was hoping we could go and borrow a cup of sugar.'

Nimrod paused and turned to gaze off in the general direction of the village. Surely he couldn't see that far?

We'll have to do this the old-fashioned way, then,' Nimrod finally announced. 'We need to establish a field-ops position, and that village would seem ideal. It has ready-made shelter and facilities.'

'And if it's abandoned we're saved the hassle of explaining to the locals who we are and why we carry so many guns,' said Frith half-jokingly.

'Exactly.'

'Hopefully we won't find that the little green men have claimed squatter's rights.'

If Nimrod noticed the sarcasm he ignored it, turning to face Crumpton, who had joined them beneath the shadow of Pegasus One.

'Doctor, your status?' he asked, effectively terminating his conversation with Frith.

'All shipshape and Bristol fashion, sir,' she replied breezily. 'I'll be able to begin recalibrating the Merlin's systems to account for the interference within half an hour.'

'Excellent,' said Nimrod. 'Frith, I want you to remain in command here. I'll take Aristedes and a small team to recce the village and assess its suitability as a forward base. We can then proceed with phase two of Project: Valhalla.'

'And what about our AWOL trainee?' asked Frith.

Don't worry yourself, Sergeant, I know exactly where she is.'

'Oh, yeah? Telepathy, is it?' Frith sneered.

‘Nothing so mundane. Sergeant,’ Nimrod said flatly. ‘She’s standing right behind you.’

Frith jumped to his feet and nearly dropped the laptop as he turned to find Cassie at his side. These two freaks were turning into some macabre Laurel and Hardy double act.

‘Sir, I need a word.’ Cassie didn’t even acknowledge the presence of Frith or Crumpton and looked directly at Nimrod with steely eyes. ‘In private.’

‘I KNOW WHAT I FELT!’ Cassie paced up and down the gangway of Pegasus One, arms folded angrily against her chest.

‘I’m sure you do, Cassie,’ said Nimrod. ‘But your telepathic abilities are still raw, untrained.’

‘Don’t patronise me, Nimrod.’

Nimrod spread his arms, conceding her point. ‘Very well. What did you see?’

Safe inside the shelter of the chopper, Cassie lifted the visor covering her face, which released with a blast of air. Her cheeks were flushed pink with agitation. She leant against the hull, blowing her cheeks out in frustration.

‘That’s the problem,’ she said with a sigh. ‘I don’t know exactly. It was... feelings. Like my head was on fire. One second I was fine, the next I’m on the floor with somebody hammering into my skull.’

‘A psychic attack?’

‘If that’s what you want to call it. It felt like somebody was projecting their holiday photos from hell straight into my brain. So many feelings of fear and horror...’ She stopped, rubbing her hands over tired-looking eyes. Nimrod gave her a few seconds to compose herself before probing the girl further.

‘Can you remember anything specific? Any image, no matter how trivial? A word perhaps?’

Cassie shook her head. ‘Nothing. At the time it all seemed so vivid. Confusing, but as real as you standing in front of me. But as soon as the images stopped...’

‘They faded like a forgotten dream In the morning.’

Cassie looked straight into Nimrod’s eyes. ‘Exactly.’

Nimrod half found himself wanting to comfort Cassie, to place an arm around her shoulder, but that’s not how he did things. Besides, he

didn't want to get close, even though they were born of the same genes, in case plans came to fruition, instead, he just looked across at her from the opposite side of the chopper, arms folded.

'You've clearly received some form of psychic contact,' he said, 'which appears to have diminished for the time being. If it reoccurs, inform me immediately. We need to monitor and understand it.'

'Do you think it's connected to the crash?'

'Do you believe in that much coincidence?' asked Nimrod.

'No,' replied Cassie firmly.

'Then we agree, but let's keep this from Frith and Crumpton. For the time being. They have good minds, but they deal in realities and certainties, not ambiguous powers of which they have little comprehension.'

Cassie nodded, understanding implicitly.

'Dismissed.'

Cassie straightened and began walking to the rear of the Merlin, replacing her helmet.

'Oh, and... Cassie?' Nimrod called after her. She turned back to him. 'Don't go running off like that again. Apart from the mood it puts Sergeant Frith in, you are part of this team, and you will conduct yourself as such. Understood?'

Their eyes locked for a few seconds. Cassie nodded. 'Sir.' And then she was gone.

Nimrod stood alone, watching Cassie go. He focused his mind down to a sharp point. Something out there had locked on to Cassie's impressive, but untrained, telepathic abilities. Something that recognised the sheer power that lay untapped within her.

Suddenly the mission had become much more interesting...

THE VILLAGE WAS DESERTED.

Little flurries of snow ran through the narrow tracks that wound around the buildings. The paths were littered with debris - broken bottles, paper, splintered, shattered furniture, shards of glass fallen from broken windows, even a discarded child's toy.

Corporal Aristedes gratefully lifted the visor on her helmet. She and three others were wearing white garments, and she saw that they blended in with the snow - ghosts walking into a ghost town.

Nimrod turned a complete circle. 'As we thought. Deserted.' He

was encased all in black, his nearly bald head exposed to the elements, but he seemed not to notice or care about the biting cold. He held up a hand, bringing the group to a halt.

Aristedes looked down sadly at the teddy bear lying in the snow, its head half ripped off. She tightened her grip around her rifle.

‘Sure they’re not hiding, sir? We don’t exactly strike a friendly image.’ She remembered the feeling she had had in the pit of her stomach when they had first seen these ramshackle houses half an hour before. She hadn’t wanted to believe that an entire community could be missing, and now, standing in the remnants of their lives, she wanted to think about it even less.

‘We would know.’ Cassie had been silent since they began the slow walk into the village, but she now looked around animatedly, just as Nimrod was doing. ‘There’s nobody here.’

‘But our records show that there should be over 150 people living here. How can they vanish like that?’

Private Dann strolled up next to Aristedes. ‘They might have seen what came down on the tundra and decided they didn’t want to stick around to see what happened next,’ he suggested. Aristedes was impressed, the rookie was taking it all in his stride.

‘Looting their own village first?’ she asked rhetorically, glancing at the devastation all around again. ‘I suppose they could have panicked, and caused all this as they rushed for supplies.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Cassie, crouching near the threshold of a house, squatting like an eager hound who had picked up a scent. ‘But that wouldn’t account for the smell.’

Aristedes frowned. ‘What smell?’

Nimrod strode past her. ‘Blood,’ he said casually as he passed behind her.

Next to Aristedes, Dann suddenly went white.

‘Don’t worry. Private. You get used to it.’ Aristedes tried to sound encouraging.

Cassie stood. ‘The entire place is doused with stale blood.’

‘I think it’s safe to say this village is secure.’ Nimrod was walking back the way they had come, towards the discarded snowmobiles. ‘I’ll advise Frith that we’ve found an appropriate base. The choppers should be able to handle a short hop to our position.’

Aristedes raised an amused eyebrow as she called after him.

‘Setting up a base in a spooky, deserted, blood-splattered ghost town? He’s not going to be happy, sir.’

Nimrod turned. Was that a smile creasing his face? ‘Corporal, at least allow me one moment of job satisfaction.’

SHE HAD BECOME USED to her heightened sense of smell over time. At first, her senses had been on the point of overload from dusk to dawn, a myriad of aromas threatening to swamp her with every breath. Even in the sterile environment of the Forge it had been almost too much to bear, the faintest odour causing her head to spin and stomach to lurch. Everything was magnified a thousandfold. Her senses perpetually overloaded

But her training had taught her how to filter out the overpowering sensations, to focus only on the ones she needed at that precise moment and control her natural reactions. But there was one overriding aroma: the sweet, alluring assault of blood. Even that was controllable at times, but the hunger was always there. How long before she fed from a human being, sucking the very life...

Cassie shook her head, banishing forbidden thoughts. She had a job to do, standing in the middle of this frozen wilderness. She closed her eyes, her nostrils flaring. Even through the filters of her BAN suit, the smells of the deserted village had been unbearable at first. New and unfamiliar, all fighting for attention. But, as Nimrod had taught her, she was slowly balancing her senses, reining them in. Searching.

Around her, the team worked. The three Merlin helicopters sat like roosting birds on a makeshift landing area cordoned off at the edge of the village. Crumpton was directing the movement of her scientific equipment, while Frith and Aristedes were shouting orders to soldiers running back and forth from the larger building that had been designated Field Operations. An impressive array of screens, keyboards and other equipment were being assembled to form the portable nerve centre of the mission.

Cassie had helped at first, but she now had reason to pause and step away. There was something else here. A new smell, dominant over the rankness of the stale blood and the plastic of the Forge’s equipment.

Her nostrils flared again. She identified the sweetness of Dr Crumpton’s Anais Anais, before moving on, pushing out further into

the village, beyond the milling Forge soldiers. She took in a lungful of air, trying not to force it, thinking with a hunter's instinct...

Ah! There it was. Human. The freshness of live flesh was unmistakeable. Whoever it was seriously needed a shower... She frowned. There was something else woven in with the human scent, just at the edge of her perception. Something incomplete, but growing.

Her head cocked suddenly, and she snapped round, looking behind her. It was on the move. She glanced around urgently, looking for Nimrod or Frith, but neither was to be seen.

She was on her own.

Filling her nostrils with air, she suddenly broke position, sprinting lithely forward. Nobody gave her a second look as she disappeared round the side of a corrugated metal shack.

She skidded down the side of the building, keeping tight to the wall. Whatever it was could move, but she could move faster and she pounded forward, searching with her mind as well as her eyes.

It was on the edge of the village, away from the activity of the Forge team, and was moving faster now. The scent was modifying all the time, the basic human signature now tinged with fear. That made her job much easier.

She was sprinting now, head low, feet hardly touching the ground as she darted from left to right, tracking her prey. Did it know it was being hunted?

She moved from one corner of the village to the other in a regular sequence, tightening her perimeter of movement inch by inch, cutting down the options for escape all the time. She cast her mind back to her training, hours spent in the deepest, dankest dungeons of the Forge with Nimrod at her side

'You think in two dimensions,' he had said, 'like a human. Why limit yourself to five senses? We recognise *no* limits.' Was she was still making the same mistake today, relying on scent to track her quarry? Shutting her eyes to block any further distractions she let her head drop forward and listened. A bird was crying out overhead and the wind whistled across the tundra. She sifted through the cacophony of sounds that the Forge had brought with them. Frith was swearing at somebody, someone else was humming a Girls Aloud song (who on Earth was that?!) and Crumpton was taking a puff of her inhaler.

One by one she silenced everything like turning the lights off in a

large house, until only one sound remained, so close she could almost feel it. A heartbeat furiously beneath a ribcage, accompanied by a harmony of shallow, frantic breathing and whimpering. It was human and it was male and most importantly it was trying its hardest to hide itself in the small, brick building behind her, scraping furniture across rough, wooden floorboards to form a protective nest.

The lock of the door shattered beneath the sole of her boot and she was in. Her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the darkened room immediately, as the stale stink of the stranger swelled her nostrils. This time she knew exactly where to go. Roughly, she yanked the curtain that separated the living area of the house with its rudimentary kitchen and moved straight towards the table. It flipped easily aside in her hands, smashing loudly against the wall as it splintered into matchwood Somebody screamed...

... and Cassie found herself looking into the terrified green eyes of an 11-year-old boy.

‘Do we know his name?’

Nimrod had adopted his customary stance, arms folded, looking sternly ahead. Frith leant against the wall across the room and Aristedes stood on the threshold of the house they’d commandeered as a makeshift surgery.

‘Not yet, I’m afraid.’ Crumpton sighed as she busied around the hastily cleared table that the boy had been placed on. ‘To be honest, I’m not hopeful of getting much in the way of sense out of him. He’s running a searing temperature and he looks like he hasn’t eaten for days. Plus,’ she added with stern emphasis, ‘I imagine being stalked round his own village by a vampire will have terrified the life out of him. It wouldn’t have helped that Cassie decided to play cat and mouse with him.’

‘She wasn’t to know it was a child,’ declared Nimrod, almost defensively.

‘I realise that. He’s petrified, hungry and very sick.’ On the table, the child moaned slowly, his breathing shallow and hoarse. ‘I’ve pumped him full of drugs, but we have to tread carefully. He’s been through a lot, and I don’t want to traumatise his system any more than it already has been.’

‘Doctor,’ Nimrod began. Crumpton knew that conversations beginning ‘Doctor’ with such a definite emphasis never worked out in her favour. ‘This is the only human being we’ve encountered since we arrived. I need to know what happened in this village before we even begin to tackle whatever came down on the tundra. We’re not the UN, Doctor. We’re here to get results, so I need this child conscious and talking.’

‘But, sir...’

‘But nothing. You’ve done your job and stabilised him. Now it’s time for me to do mine.’

‘You’re not going to talk to him, are you?’

Nimrod’s eyes narrowed. ‘And why shouldn’t I, Doctor?’

Crumpton paused, considering her options before deciding that she was damned already just by being here.

‘He’s been through a lot and, well, seeing someone like you...’

‘Yes, Doctor. Please continue.’

Crumpton swallowed nervously. ‘Well, it might not be... I mean, he could...’

‘You mean he could go into shock if questioned by somebody who has a face like this?’ He waved a hand vaguely around his startling features.

‘With all due respect, yes.’

Nimrod paused, fixing her with a stare that turned her guts to ice.

‘I’ll take my chances. Get him talking.’

Nimrod turned and barged his way through the door, brushing past Aristedes, who had to jump to get out of his way. Across the room, Frith, silent throughout, looked at Crumpton with undisguised admiration.

‘I’ll give you this, Crumpton. You’ve got balls.’

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Aristedes looked down on the sleeping form of the boy, framed in a square of light from the open door to the next room. Night had fallen outside, and thankfully they’d found that the electricity was still working.

The boy had slept fitfully, blankets twisted around him like a straitjacket. Aristedes looked up as Nimrod swept in, padding over to the child like a giant cat, those brilliant eyes dancing with curiosity. Without even acknowledging her existence, he came up beside her and peered down at the boy, taking in every detail of the scene. Behind him, a strangely muted Crumpton followed.

‘Has his condition changed?’ the doctor asked, in the whisper that everyone adopted in waiting rooms or beside sickbeds. Aristedes shook her head.

‘He’s been drifting in and out of sleep. His temperature is still through the roof, but he seems less agitated.’

‘Have you taken a blood test?’ boomed Nimrod, his voice cutting through the quiet of the room. Nimrod obviously hadn’t heard about the whispering rule. Before Crumpton could reply, the boy’s eyes

snapped open at the sound of Nimrod's grating question. Suddenly very awake and obviously terrified, he scuttled away from this nightmare figure, pressing himself against the bedstead.

'Easy now,' soothed Crumpton, barging around Nimrod to reach out to the startled youngster, 'it's okay. There's nothing to be afraid of. We're here to help.'

That didn't seem to calm the boy, who never let his eyes move from Nimrod's black armour. He raised a shaking finger and pointed towards the vampire.

'Stallo!'

The word was filled with so much primal dread that Aristedes found herself shivering in response.

'Stallo?' she said, the word unfamiliar and alien. 'What the hell does that mean?' The boy repeated the word over and over again, never taking his eyes away from Nimrod.

'How should I know?' barked Crumpton as she tried to calm the child with little success. 'I only did Latin and French at school. Scandinavian wasn't on offer.'

Nimrod raised his right arm and spoke into the small microphone embedded into his armour's wrist.

'Oracle.'

'Standing by.'

'Require translation matrix. Stallo: sierra, tango, alpha, lima, lima, oscar. End of word.'

'Accessing.'

There was a moment as the computer hundreds of miles away ran through its countless databanks until it found the correct dialect. All the time the boy and the hunter stared at each other.

'Stallo,' Oracle's tinny voice began. 'North Sami for "metal man". Refers to the giant, horned creature that the Sami await at Yuletide, usually dressed in a black or metallic suit.'

Aristedes and Crumpton turned to face Nimrod, looking his black clad form up and down.

'Sounds familiar,' mused Crumpton.

Nimrod didn't comment as Oracle continued.

'Unless the local community provides Stallo with food and drink, legend states that he will cave in the skulls of the villagers' children and suck out their brains and blood.'

This time Crumpton remained quiet. Perhaps this legend was a little close to home after all.

‘No wonder he’s terrified,’ commented Aristedes, the horrific irony not lost on her. ‘He obviously thinks that you’re here to decide if he’s been a good boy this year.’

Nimrod nodded slowly as if a plan was forming. Aristedes knew she wasn’t going to like it.

‘Indeed,’ he rumbled, ‘and why should we give him reason to think differently?’

Aristedes and Crumpton exchanged concerned glances.

‘Oracle,’ Nimrod spoke into the microphone, ‘prepare uplink to linguistic database.’

IVER DUNFJELD TRIED to look away from Stallo but found he could not. Even as the creature spoke to the disembodied woman’s voice in their strange gabbling language, Iver’s mind was racing. He’d seen enough weird things over the last few days. Should he really be so surprised that the bogeyman of his youth was now standing before him, finally made flesh and blood? At first he had believed through his fever that these people, with their uniforms and guns were here to help him. But Stallo walked with them, and he knew that the end would be soon. Ragnarok had truly come to their village, just as his grandfather had said it would.

Stallo loomed over him, moving closer to the bed. Iver sank back further into the pillow, trying to look away from that bleached, ravaged face. He was amazed that he’d managed to keep his bladder under control as it was, if only for the fact that he didn’t want to anger the wild man further. For a second he stood there, staring down at him, as if listening to a voice that only he could hear, before that terrible, thunderous voice spoke to him.

‘What is you name, boy?’

Iver was taken aback at first, but then cursed his naivety. Of course Stallo could speak their language. He’d been coming to Sami villages for centuries, why shouldn’t he be able to talk in North Sami? Saying that, Stallo’s women seemed surprised at his words, exchanging looks of amazement. Shaking slightly, Iver cleared his voice, the commanding, terrifying figure compelling him to speak.

‘Iver. Iver Dunfjeld.’

‘Do you know who I am, Iver Dunfjeld?’

Iver nodded, tears filling the corner of his eyes.

‘And you know what I will do to you if you do not tell me the truth?’

‘I do,’ Iver stuttered.

‘Then tell me exactly what has happened here. Tell me what has happened to your village. Where is your family? Where are your friends?’

Once Iver began, he couldn’t stop, the story spilling out of him. He told of the village after the lights fell from the sky; how his grandfather had warned everyone; how they hadn’t believed him. About how Otto had vanished and how people had got sick. Terribly sick. But he couldn’t finish the story. Even though he knew what Stallo would do to him, the words wouldn’t come. He’d been trying to block it out and even his fear wasn’t enough to break the spell.

‘Iver,’ Stallo asked again, his voice thick with warning, ‘you must tell me what happened. I can’t help if I don’t know.’

Iver glanced up, confused. Help? Stallo must think he was stupid. Stallo didn’t help people. Stallo killed people. The legends told of the wild man kidnapping naughty children or poking his staff up the skirts of local girls, but he never came to give any kind of salvation. Why should he? Stallo existed to punish wickedness and there had been enough wickedness here to last several lifetimes over the last few days.

But... Iver hesitated. There was something in the faces of the people standing around him that comforted him, despite Stallo’s evil presence. The women were kind. As he had fallen in and out of consciousness, they had cared for him, never leaving his side, one of them always there to cool his brow with a damp cloth. Maybe he wasn’t in trouble. Maybe Stallo had been sent to put things right.

Could he trust this figure of fear and terror to his people?

Did he have a choice?

He bit his lip, finally making a decision.

‘I went to get my dad some soup from the store,’ he began, his young voice cracking with emotion. ‘He was sick. So was my mother, but she was sleeping, but I knew that Dad needed to eat. He was getting weaker. But when I got back to the house, it was too late.’

‘Too late?’ repeated Stallo. ‘Your father was dead?’

Iver swallowed, emotion threatening to engulf him. He shook his head, ignoring how it span, trying to forget how hot he felt.

‘No. Worse’

The women exchanged glances, and Stallo stepped forward, frowning. Iver knew he was displeased. ‘Worse?’ he growled.

‘He had begun to change.’

If Stallo was surprised, he didn’t show it. Things like this must happen all the time in Stallo’s world. ‘Change into what, Iver?’

Iver felt the words dry in the pit of his stomach and he began to sob. He couldn’t bring himself to say, and the grief that had been locked up for days was finally let loose. He wailed, the cries choking his words as Stallo suddenly grabbed him with two massive hands and began to shake him gently.

‘What did he change into, Iver?’

Before Iver could answer, a scream pierced the atmosphere from somewhere outside. Stallo kept looking at him. but the women ran to the window, peering out into the darkness. Shouts came from the street, punctuated by the sounds of running.

Iver fell back on to the bed as Stallo released him. There was no need to answer the question. Stallo would be discovering the truth soon enough.

CASSIE WAS first to reach the source of the screaming, but no amount of training could have prepared her for what she saw. A hunched, lank creature stood in the darkness, the corpse of what appeared to be Private Longworth held in its arms, freshly spilled guts steaming on the cold ice at its feet. The lights dotted around the village cast a small amount of light, but not enough to make out the creature in any detail. As Cassie skittered to a halt, the creature gazed in her direction. Its breathing was ragged, and its clothes were ripped and hanging off in strips. Was this thing human?

The two stood face to face, before the creature groaned eerily and began to shamble towards her, still carrying the remains of Longworth. Cassie tensed and heard the pounding of feet coming up fast behind her.

It was Frith.

The sergeant took one look at the scene and the creature lumbering across the snow. ‘Jesus Christ!’ He raised his rifle to his

shoulder and let off a single shot, which left a neat hole on the center of the thing's forehead.

Blood exploded in red mist from the back of its head, but the creature hadn't even screamed. Its advance had stopped and it stood silently, a look of confusion animating its features as its mouth went slack and it began to sway from side to side.

'He's dead,' said Cassie, shock slipping away from her.

'Which one?' asked Frith seriously, his gun still trained ahead of him. 'I just blew half that thing's brain all the way back to Dartmoor and it's still standing.'

'REPORT,' Nimrod ordered, not affected by the bloody tableau before him. Crumpton had her hand clasped over her mouth and was obviously struggling not to throw up everywhere. Aristedes, Frith was pleased to note, had brought her gun up to match his stance.

'I pumped a bullet in that thing's brain,' Frith summed up, with appropriate succinctness, he thought. 'And it's still standing.'

'And you considered that the most appropriate course of action, Frith?' said Nimrod.

Frith stiffened. He wasn't used to having field decisions questioned. 'Standing orders in zombie situations, sir. Take out the brain before it can attack further.'

'And what, in your scientific opinion,' Nimrod asked, not taking his attention from the creature, 'makes you think that it is a zombie?'

'Well, take a bloody look at it!' Frith raised his voice in incredulity. 'Shuffling, moaning, looks human, has a thing about ripping guts out and can withstand a direct bullet wound to the head.' He turned back to stare at the brute who was still regarding them with moronic fascination. 'If it walks like a zombie, groans like a zombie and smells like a zombie, chances are it's a sodding zombie!'

Nimrod looked at him evenly. 'Idiot,' he said quietly, before turning to walk towards the creature. Crumpton put a hand out to stop him but he shrugged her off. As he walked, he was still talking to the team, as if relating notes in a scientific lecture.

'I'm not sure we're dealing with your average class-R somnambulist here, Frith. Look at it. You're right, it does, or possibly did, appear to be human, but there is no evidence of putrefaction. Quite the opposite, in fact.'

Frith glanced back at the creature, who was now whimpering slightly, gore from Longworth's body dripping between its clawed fingers, matting the coarse black hair that erupted through the pallid skin of its hands, arms and face. Bloated lips pulled back to reveal a mouth of stained teeth - they looked more like metal than enamel - while its eyes blinked from the flow of blood that bubbled from the tidy, blackened wound above its almost Neanderthal forehead.

This was no time for a lecture. The thing looked like it was ready to attack.

Frith's instincts were correct. With a guttural roar, the creature flung aside Longworth's corpse, which crashed to the floor like a broken puppet, and leapt forward, talon-like hands outstretched towards Nimrod. Frith shouted the order to fire and both he and Aristedes shot repeatedly, the air shattered by gunfire. The thing's body twitched and danced under the onslaught of bullets. Yet still it came, wailing like a banshee, barely slowed down.

Cassie sprang forward, ready to take on the creature, but found herself hauled back by Nimrod. In a whirlwind of ripping nails and ragged clothes, it was on him in a flash, crashing into his bulk with a thud, teeth bared and ready to bite.

But Nimrod held his ground and snow churned up under the force of the struggle. Moving so fast he was almost a blur in Frith's eyes, the hunter thrust the palm of his right hand up against the monster's jaw, snapping it shut with a sickening crunch, his other arm snaking around its back. The attacker's spine cracked as Nimrod brought his flattened hand sharply in, sandwiching it between his torso and arm. Frith winced as he watched the body thud to the ice, squealing with pain.

Hardly pausing for breath, Nimrod slammed a boot against its stomach, exactly opposite the point of its broken spine and swung his arm-mounted crossbow to point down at its chest. With a clack of metal, the loading mechanism clicked a bolt into place. The weapon that had brought so many of the rogue vampires of Project: Twilight to their end fired once more, ripping into the creature's chest and pinning it to the ground. After a moment of thrashing struggle, the creature fell silent, its tongue lolling out of a slackened mouth.

Calmly, Nimrod crouched down beside the fallen figure. He looked up at his stunned audience.

‘Dr Crumpton, we have a post mortem to perform.’

Deadly Radiation

Crumpton removed her blood-drenched gloves with a snapping of rubber and threw them into a bin. She blew out her cheeks wearily and looked up at the photo of a man smiling next to a pretty, middle-aged woman on the wall of the surgery.

‘You do realise that’s him,’ she said, indicating the picture with a nod before turning back to the prone creature that was strapped to the makeshift operating table. Nimrod didn’t take his attention away from the slimy liver he was gently extracting from the large cavity they had made in the creature’s abdomen.

‘Of course I do. This surgery, it seems, belonged to one Matti Jackiesson, the physician of this and neighbouring communities. He was married. No children, according to the records in the office outside.’

He slipped the liver into a metallic dish with a wet plop.

‘Was,’ repeated Crumpton with sad emphasis, looking down at the cadaver. Under the harsh light of the surgery lights, the transformation of the once ruggedly handsome man was even more startling. Stinking, brown hair covered his - or should that be its - entire body, bursting through the skin at random points. The musculature was all wrong, bulging powerfully at certain parts, but appearing to have wasted at others. Frith had been right about the teeth too. Crumpton had carefully removed a twisted molar to discover that it was constructed from a metallic substance, yet wasn’t an artificial piece of dental treatment. It was actually growing from the man’s roots. His skull too was twisted, pushing forward to distort his features, giving him a somewhat primitive visage.

‘What happened to you, Dr Jackiesson?’ she asked in a whisper.

‘I think this may give us the answer, Crumpton,’ murmured Nimrod as he speared the organ he had removed with a long silver wand. Figures began to stream across a panel set into the device’s

side. It beeped twice before falling quiet. Crumpton peered around Nimrod to see the results.

‘Radiation. His body is riddled with it.’

Crumpton frowned. ‘I’ve never seen a radiation signature like that before.’

‘Are you sure about that. Doctor? It’s highly likely we’ve experienced exactly this form of radiation very recently. Cross-check this with your analysis of the interference from the crash site.’ Nimrod pulled the wand from the liver with a sucking slurp and handed it to Crumpton, who hustled across to the laptop standing waiting at a side table. She connected the device to the computer and uploaded the data in seconds.

‘Eighty-seven per cent match confirmed’ flashed across the length of the screen.

‘Fascinating, it’s not conclusive...’ mused Crumpton.

‘But a relationship exists between the radiation in this man’s body and our crashed xenotech - radiation that is capable of mutating the human body at an alarming rate, physically augmenting DNA and boosting adrenalin levels while disabling key motor functions.’

‘But that’s impossible,’ said Crumpton firmly, facing Nimrod across the dead body.

Nimrod regarded her through narrowed eyes. ‘Crumpton, in my experience you have an excellent brain and keen scientific mind, yet your reasoning frequently lacks imagination. At the Forge, we work with the impossible every day.’

‘Sorry,’ she muttered, angry with herself for the slip, ‘I know that, it’s just that at times, even with all my experience...’

‘Your mind still struggles when faced with the unknown.’

‘Yes’

‘It’s perfectly understandable. You are only human, after all.’

‘Thank you,’ said Crumpton through thinned lips. ‘I think.’ She ran a hand through her hair. ‘So Frith was wrong, then. This isn’t a regular zombie horde we’re dealing with?’

‘Horde, Doctor?’ asked Nimrod quizzically.

Crumpton returned Nimrod’s look. Now who was being slow?

‘Do you seriously believe that Dr Jackiesson here is the only member of this community affected by the radiation? How else do you account for the disappearances? My imaginative reasoning is telling

me that somewhere out there, there's an entire army of cavemen to deal with.'

'What a reassuring thought, Crumpton.' Nimrod almost smiled. 'Thank you for that. Yes, you are correct. Sergeant Frith was severely off track. We've dealt with zombies before -'

'Don't remind me.' Crumpton shuddered. 'I still have the scars.' indeed. However. Dr Jackiesson is showing no signs of traditional zombification and I don't believe that he was searching for food.'

'You think he ripped poor Longworth open for fun?' Crumpton asked, glancing at the body bag in the corner of the room.

'Not at all, Doctor. I questioned Cassie, as she was the first on the scene. Once she'd stopped sulking over me preventing her from attacking, and once I got her to stop sulking because she'd frozen at the sight, she provided some very useful information.'

'What did she see?'

Nimrod paused before continuing. He could be sympathetic to human sensitivity, but now wasn't the time.

'The creature wasn't feeding. He was examining, ripping out organs and trying to put them back. Like a child taking a toy apart to discover how it works before putting it back together.'

'You're saying the creature was trying to "fix" Private Longworth?' Nimrod fixed her with one of his best piercing gazes.

'Yes, Doctor, I believe I am.'

ARISTEDES COVERED her mouth as she walked back into the room, her eyes struggling to make out Iver's bed in the gloom. The stink had got worse and for a moment she feared that the boy had soiled the sheets again. But as she moved closer she found him lying with the sheets thrown away from his damp body, the bed drenched in sweat. Her eyes watered but she couldn't tell if the stench was coming from him or was just hanging in the air like suffocating smog.

Whatever was happening, Iver was getting worse, tossing and turning in his fitful sleep as if prodded and poked by invisible demons. The fever had taken full hold of him now and Dr Crumpton's drugs were no longer having any affect. She sat helplessly on the seat beside his cot and watched as he murmured and groaned in the midst of whatever nightmare had gripped his mind. Shivering slightly, despite the stuffy heat of the room, Aristedes wondered for the countless time

today what had happened here. What could leave a village deserted save for a sick little boy and a mutated ghoul? The one thing she was sure of was that unless they could do something soon, Iver would lose his fight and be unable to help them solve the mystery.

Looking at him squirm, perhaps that would at least be a welcome release. She'd always hated seeing children in pain and this child was no different, even if she had only just met him.

'No child should ever suffer, Lysandra,' her mother had told her so many times when she was growing up. She had never really forgiven Aristedes for joining the army, even though there had been difficult choices behind her decision.

The door opened and flooded the room with light as Cassie walked in briskly. Obviously agitated, she brushed wayward strands of her brown hair back into position.

'What's the matter?' Aristedes asked, rising from the chair. 'Are you okay?'

Cassie's eyes were locked on to Iver's prone body.

'Orders from Nimrod. He's to be put in immediate isolation.'

Aristedes glanced back at the boy. 'Why? Has Dr Crumpton identified what's wrong with him?'

'They haven't told me exactly what's going on...'

Now there's a surprise, Aristedes thought to herself.

'... but there's every chance he's been affected by whatever transformed that thing into a monster. The entire area is swamped by some kind of weird radiation.'

'But why haven't we been affected?' Aristedes said, standing between Cassie and Iver.

'I don't think anything could get past our standard-issue Forge anti-rad therapy, but I don't want this kid going native on me.'

There was venom behind Cassie's voice that made Aristedes's blood run cold.

'You're not the maternal type, are you?'

Cassie's eyes narrowed, as if struggling with some rogue thought for a second, but she eventually shook her head decisively.

'No. Never have been, never will be. What's that got to do with anything?'

'Doesn't matter,' said Aristedes sadly, before turning back to look at Iver. 'Okay, we'd better set up a standard level-three quarantine.'

‘We’ll seal the door and post Private Kirk outside. We can set some web-cams up to keep an eye on things.’

With a grunt, Cassie strode from the room.

Alone again, Aristedes looked down at Iver. His eyes flickered open and locked on hers for a second before he was snatched back by his delirium.

No child should ever suffer, she thought sadly as she closed the door behind her, no child should ever suffer.

Flight into Danger

The morning brought with it a new freshness to the village. Frith leant against one of the tiny dwellings that dotted the village, sucking gratefully on a cigarette. The white smoke was snatched away on the chill wind that periodically blasted through the settlement.

He watched as Nimrod busied himself around one of the Merlins, his boots crunching into the thin film of ice that crusted the ground as he worked methodically from one side of the chopper to the other. He knelt by the front wheel of the undercarriage, checking something.

Frith took a last drag on his cigarette and threw it to the ground, it fizzed briefly against the cold ice as the sergeant hefted his rifle and trudged across to the chopper. He stopped and looked down at Nimrod, who was checking a camera that was slung beneath the hull of the aircraft. He didn't look up.

'Can I help you, Frith?'

'I doubt it. What are you up to?'

'Preparing to take Pegasus One on a sweep of the crash site. It might be useful.'

'Not bloody likely. These things are our ticket home, I'm not letting you take one up and risk damaging it.'

'Well, Frith, as you are not my father, thankfully I don't need to ask you for the keys to the family car.' Nimrod stood.

Frith laughed. 'That was almost funny.'

'It wasn't meant to be.'

Crunching footsteps announced the approach of Dr Crumpton across the village. She looked heavenwards as she caught the back end of the conversation. 'Can't you two go for five minutes without arguing? It's like being with a married couple.'

'Talk some sense into him, Crumpton.' Frith held his arm up, indicating the Merlin. 'He's taking a chopper up to sweep the crash site.'

Crumpton's brow creased in irritation. 'Sir, I must advise against that. Until we know more about the nature of the interference field and all the recalibrations are complete it would be highly -'

Nimrod cut her dead. 'I wasn't aware this mission was being commanded by committee.' Crumpton looked on, stung. 'I will be taking Pegasus One to sweep the crash site.'

Frith jumped in. 'I'm not letting you unnecessarily endanger the life of any member of this team.'

'I'll take it up myself. This discussion is at an end.'

Frith and Crumpton glanced at each other. Frith shrugged, past caring.

'Oh, very well,' Crumpton conceded.

'I'm glad I have your approval,' Nimrod mumbled dryly. 'Crumpton. I want you on station monitoring my progress.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Frith, you are in command until I return.'

'I thought you'd never ask.'

Without another word, Nimrod turned and vaulted up into the cockpit of the chopper, slamming the door closed firmly.

'What, no kiss goodbye?' Frith quipped gruffly.

Crumpton grabbed him by the arm wearily. 'Come on,' she bristled, and began to lead him away from the aircraft as its engines fired and began to whine. The pair turned when they were a safe distance away, sheltering next to one of the ramshackle dwellings.

Slowly the rotor blades began to turn, the whine increasing until the downdraft from the now rapidly turning blades began to blast away the dusting of snow all around. Crumpton turned away from the wave of air to see Cassie sprinting from the far side of the village. She didn't look happy as she saw Nimrod sitting at the cockpit window.

'Where the hell's he going?' she snarled. Frith caught the girl as she came level with them, preventing her going any further.

'Keep back, you stupid girl,' he shouted as the Merlin jumped away from the ground, quickly gaining height as Nimrod pulled back on the throttle. Cassie breathed out angrily, slapping Frith's restraining arm to one side.

'You bastard!' she pushed out into the air towards Nimrod, who she could see in the cockpit window, putting her full force behind a telepathic outburst. The only reaction from Nimrod was an almost

imperceptible tilt of his head as he quickly glanced out of the window locking eyes with Cassie for a fleeting second. And then the Merlin was gone.

ENCASED within the protective cocoon of the chopper's cockpit, Nimrod gazed intently down over the grey-white expanse of the tundra as the Merlin swept smoothly over the rough terrain. The constant throb of the rotor blades, dulled by the soundproofing of the cockpit, comforted him. It felt like a giant heartbeat all around.

Expertly powering the chopper onwards, he thumbed a switch. 'Oracle, patch me in to Dr Crumpton.'

'Complying.'

'Crumpton, this is Nimrod.'

We've got you on our screens, sir.' Crumpton's shrill voice crackled in his earpiece. 'Green across the board. All monitors functioning.'

'Good. Keep a sharp eye out, Doctor. I don't want any surprises.'

'Sir...'

'... THERE'S somebody here who wants to speak to you.'

Crumpton sat at the field-ops control station, monitors shining brightly, scanning equipment chattering away to itself. Cassie stood behind her, face set in a grim frown.

'You left me, Nimrod,' she spat, automatically patched in to the communication circuit. 'I should be up there with you.'

'Not this time. Cassie...'

'... I NEED you on the ground.'

Static hissed for a few seconds and Cassie didn't respond. Good. She was learning.

Nimrod adjusted his course a fraction, letting the chopper sweep low over a rise in the ground. He expertly flicked a series of controls and various displays lit up one by one. 'Crumpton, I'm bringing full sensors online. Calibrate for...'

* * *

'... SATURATION SWEEP.'

Crumpton ignored the silently fuming Cassie at her side as her

fingers danced across the computer keyboard. 'Yes, sir.' The multiscreen set-up flickered and pulsed, with the central monitor showing a radar view of the chopper's progress. The green pulse of the sensor fired out across the screen. A sparkle of green dots was highlighted as it flashed, fading into nothing, before their bright glow was fuelled again by another pass of the sensor sweep.

'What are those?' asked Cassie.

'I'm not sure,' Crumpton almost snapped in irritation. She wasn't used to keeping up a running commentary on her work. 'They might be life signs.' She spoke into her comlink. 'Sir, I'm picking up a localised collection of radiation spikes, approximately one kilometre ahead on your present course.'

'Acknowledged, Crumpton.'

NIMROD INCREASED SPEED and eased the chopper even lower, a slipstream of snow churning up in the aircraft's wake as it covered the distance quickly. 'I have visual contact now.'

Ahead, the white of the tundra was dotted with black smudges that formed into slow-moving figures as the chopper flew closer. They shambled across the uneven terrain, all moving in the same direction as if answering some invisible signal.

'Crumpton, I think we just found our missing villagers.'

CRUMPTON SQUINTED at the figures on her screen. 'This is all very odd,' she mused. 'What on earth are they doing?'

'Answering a call?' Cassie wondered aloud, her bottom lip sticking out absently.

Crumpton swivelled her chair to face Cassie. 'Are you feeling something?'

'I don't know,' replied Cassie, voice lowered to a whisper. 'There's something out there.'

The speaker crackled. 'Yes...'

'... I'M FEELING IT TOO.' Nimrod murmured into the radio mic.

On the screen, the shuffling figures paid the intrusive presence of the chopper overhead no heed, carrying on towards whatever call was pulling them forward.

'They certainly seem to have some purpose.'

‘They’re moving towards the crash site,’ hissed Crumpton in his ear.

Nimrod pulled the Merlin round in a smooth, arcing turn, circling gracefully around the group of bizarre beings below.

CRUMPTON TYPED RAPIDLY, the bank of screens flaring with data. She studied one screen in particular, it showed a multi-spectrum view of the area directly below the chopper, the figures showing up as red dots. Wispy, rainbow-coloured trails stretched out in lines before each dot, trailing off the edge of the screen.

‘What’s that?’ Cassie asked.

Crumpton frowned. ‘I’m not sure.’ She continued to stare at the screen, attempting to decipher the information.

‘Crumpton, report,’ the speaker barked. The scientist turned her chair and thumbed the comlink.

‘Sir, it’s as we suspected. The radiation signature of the interference we’ve been picking up since we arrived is linked into the subjects below.’

‘Any other observations?’ Nimrod’s voice sounded even more unreal heard over the speakers.

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ replied Crumpton. ‘The source of the signature is definitely centred on the crash site. The resonance trails all link the subjects back to it.’

‘UNDERSTOOD.’ Nimrod pulled the chopper into a final banking turn before gunning the aircraft forward once again. ‘I am proceeding directly to the crash site.’

‘Please proceed with caution, sir,’ Crumpton warned through the speaker. ‘The radiation levels are increasing the closer you get to the site, and could spike at any second. We just don’t know how the instruments will react.’

‘Thank you, Crumpton,’ said Nimrod tersely. ‘I’ll try to bear it in mind.’

As he flew on, Nimrod attempted to expand his mind beyond the confines of the cockpit, detaching himself from the flesh and blood that he found so limiting. His heart began to beat hard and fast.

There was something out there on the tundra, of that he had no doubt. A presence, just beyond the range of his perception. It had

already found Cassie, but was yet to touch his mind. Hiding, perhaps. Or waiting? Cassie's telepathic abilities were much more powerful than his, he grudgingly admitted to himself. But, she lacked the experience to use them effectively and he had chosen to leave her behind. He wanted to make first contact himself.

One day, however, Cassie would be truly formidable, and he must be in control of that.

A chirping signal from the instrument bank pulled him back within himself. The radar flared over a large mass dead ahead and Nimrod made a course adjustment, pulling the Merlin round the edge of a rocky outcrop that jutted up into the sky, adding texture to the otherwise flat terrain.

As the aircraft rounded the outcrop, he saw it.

'PEGASUS ONE TO BASE. Crumpton, 1 have visual contact on target.'

Crumpton's eyes practically shone as she leant forward, her gaze transfixed by what she saw on the main screen. 'So I see,' she breathed.

Behind, Cassie was equally enraptured. 'Oh, my God.'

NIMROD STARED STRAIGHT AHEAD through the window of the Merlin, taking in every detail of the structure that rose up from the hard tundra.

Decades of hunting down the relics of Project: Twilight had deprived him of these moments, the point of a mission when the harvest objective was clear. Possibilities stretching out before him.

The chopper flew closer. A sharp arrow of jagged, undulating metal jutted up into the air like a giant, gnarled arm, talons stretching towards the sunlight. Sweeping lines of bolted black metal swooped in lines all around the object, giving a strange, avant-garde look to this undeniably alien structure. Towards its top, the waves of metal smoothed away, fused with the main hull, tapering into a high, sharp summit. Slung around this point symmetrically hung what could only be enormous thruster engines. It was, without doubt, a spacecraft.

More of the brainwashed local population were thronged around the base of the structure. Some were actually climbing over the lower reaches, while others were picking over chunks of blackened debris that were scattered in a wide circle away from the ship.

Nimrod toggled a switch on the instrument bank and a screen showing the visual view from outside zoomed in closer on one of the engines, a green targeting cursor bracketing around it. A black, jagged scar was ripped across its circumference.

‘Fascinating.’

STATIC HISSED all around Nimrod’s voice, muffling it as he spoke. ‘Crumpton, I assume you’re getting all this?’

‘Absolutely, sir!’ The scientific officer almost gasped. ‘There’s a lot of interference starting to creep in, but it’s magnificent!’

Nimrod cut through the wavering levels of static. ‘Don’t get carried away, Doctor. Thoughts?’

Crumpton consulted a screen that showed the hulk of the alien craft, data trailing all over it. ‘We’ve still only got visual data to go on. There appears to be some kind of force field around the vessel which our scanners are still unable to penetrate.’

‘And?’

‘The visible part of the structure is approximately 400 feet high...’

‘Visible part?’ Cassie asked, confused.

Crumpton swivelled to face her, regarding her as a teacher would a particularly lacking student. ‘Yes. The craft must have made planet fall at a very steep trajectory.

‘You mean it’s buried?’

‘Yes. We have no idea how much more there is under the surface.’ The speakers crackled, spiking with an increased level of background static. ‘Fascinating though... discussion is... we need to move... Crumpton.’

Crumpton and Cassie glanced at each other, suddenly worried. Crumpton thumbed the comlink. ‘Say again, sir. You’re breaking up.’

‘IT WASN’T IMPORTANT.’

Nimrod had pulled the chopper round in a curving arc, and now began to pull round for another pass in front of the ship. He focused the camera in on the ‘zombies’ teeming around the craft like ants.

‘They’re a repair team,’ he whispered into the mic. ‘They’re repairing the ship.’

‘That would... sense.’ Crumpton came in and out with a flare of static, it’s certainly consistent with our observations of the subject that

was neutralised in the village.'

'I concur,' Nimrod agreed succinctly.

'That does beg one rather worrying question.'

'BEING?' Static crackled again, but Crumpton ignored it.

'If we theorise that these poor Sami are being controlled and slaved into repairing the ship, that denotes some kind of intelligence at work.'

'A... hypothesis.'

'The question is, sir, where *is* that intelligence?'

* * *

BOTH NIMROD and Cassie had felt something - that he knew - but it took a practical mind like Crumpton's to crystallise the issue. That's why he liked her.

'Let's not worry about that for the moment, Doctor. Our main aim should be to gather as much information and data about the craft as possible with the current resources available.'

'Agreed.'

'I'm going to fly directly over the top of the structure.'

'SAY AGAIN, sir.' Crumpton was forced to raise her voice over the increasing levels of static. 'The interference is worsening.'

'Repeat... directly over the top of the structure.'

Crumpton leaned forward urgently. 'Sir, I would advise against that. Radiation levels have been rising steadily for the last few minutes, and we don't know the nature of the force field surrounding the ship. I recommend that you return to base.'

The reply was drowned out by static, Nimrod's voice becoming fainter and fainter. 'Proceeding...'

'SIR!' Crumpton yelled into the mic.

'Repeat, am proceeding with overhead flyby. Stand by.'

He pulled back determinedly on the joystick, manoeuvring the Merlin into a steep climb that took it high over the heads of the brainwashed 'pit gang' below. The arcing lines of the alien spacecraft glinted in the sunlight, adding to its displaced nature in this

wilderness.

The chopper began to level off smoothly, and Nimrod altered the scanner parameters to begin gathering more data from below.

Nimrod's vampiric senses told him something was about to happen, then, a split second later, the Merlin's engine pitch changed and the cockpit began to vibrate. Shrill, urgent alarms began to warble and warning lights blinked across the instrument panel as the joystick began to fight against Nimrod's grip. The entire aircraft began to buck and rock in the air, a stallion trying to throw its rider.

Gritting his teeth, Nimrod fought to regain control, the engines of the chopper shrieking their protest.

'Crumpton! Report!'

ACROSS CRUMPTON'S panel of instruments, alarms clamoured for attention and the screens showed blizzards of static. Her fingers moved across the console, attempting to find the problem.

'What's happening?' Cassie yelled urgently over the din.

'The radiation levels spiked off the end of the scale. I knew this would happen!' She stabbed at the comlink. 'Base to Pegasus One. Come in.'

Static.

'Pegasus One, please respond!'

Cassie grabbed at Crumpton's sleeve. 'Get him back!'

Crumpton glared up at the young woman and yanked her arm away. 'Find Frith,' she hissed in response.

Footsteps ran up behind them. 'Don't bother, I'm here,' grumbled Frith as he clattered through the door. 'What's our status?'

Crumpton reeled off the situation like a shopping list. 'Radiation levels have spiked. Communications blackout. Contact lost with Pegasus One.'

Frith breathed out heavily. 'Fantastic.' Without saying another word he ran back out into the village.

Crumpton continued her vigil at the comlink. 'Base to Pegasus One, come in. Please respond!'

Cassie gripped the back of Crumpton's chair, her knuckles whitening as the plastic began to splinter beneath her fingers.

Frith pounded up a shallow rise at the far side of the village, gaining as much ground as he could in the otherwise flat terrain. He

stopped, looking out to the horizon to get his bearings, before pulling a pair of digital binoculars up to his eyes.

He scanned back and forth across the horizon before spotting a black dot against the barren white of the sky. He toggled the magnification as far as he could, the black dot coalescing into a tiny image of the Merlin.

It climbed slowly before spinning 360 degrees, buffeting alarmingly as its tail whipped the aircraft around.

The sky around the chopper haloed red for a fleeting second, before the black smudge that was Pegasus One blossomed outwards in a ball of orange flame. Three seconds later, a boom, barely audible, whispered at Frith's ears.

The sergeant lowered the binoculars.

'Bollocks.'

IN THE SHROUDED darkness of the quarantined room that served as Iver Dunfeld's quarters, the boy cried out once in his sleep. He thrashed and turned, his cry becoming a low, keening moan as his limbs, glistening with a sickly sheen of perspiration, tangled again and again in the yellowing, sweat-drenched sheets.

The boy began to calm, the rasp of his breathing becoming steadier and shallower as the anguished lines of his face softened into a deeper, contented sleep.

As he slept, one hand moved unconsciously up and clawed fingers began to scratch at the reddened, raw skin on his forearm from which thick tufts of black hair were beginning to sprout.

Trapped

Frith slung his rifle over his shoulder as he looked at his team making preparations to move out. They had commandeered a ragtag collection of vehicles - an orange-roofed snowcat and several two-seater snowmobiles - as well as the vehicles they had brought with them aboard Pegasus Three. They weren't in the best condition, but they'd get them across the snowy wastes in the fastest time. And there was no way he was risking either of the two remaining choppers in a pointless rescue mission. Nimrod was tough, but Frith doubted even he could have survived that.

'Get moving, you lot!' he shouted at the team moving backwards and forwards, securing equipment on the snowmobiles and loading it into the cabin of the snowcat. Shouting at the grunts definitely made him feel better.

Cassie sat impatiently on a snowmobile, face hidden by her BAN-suit helmet. She kept looking round, and it was all he'd been able to do to stop her from rushing straight off to the crash site. Still, if she got herself killed, that would be a second problem out of his way.

Crumpton stood by Frith's side. 'We still have a harvest to assess and complete, Frith,' she reminded him, tapping something into the screen on her sleeve.

'Frankly, Edith,' the security chief said, almost snarling and using Crumpton's Christian name with as little respect as possible, 'you can stuff your harvest.'

'I don't think that's a very constructive...'

'I don't care what you think. As far I'm concerned, I'm the ranking officer now, and if I choose to abort the harvest, that's my call. All right?'

Crumpton chose to remain quiet, shaking her head wearily.

'Come on!' Cassie shouted.

Frith began to move towards his own snowmobile as Aristedes

crunched her way across the snow to stand next to Crumpton. 'Aristedes, you're in command until I get back.'

'Sir,' she acknowledged briskly.

The sergeant climbed down onto the seat of the sleek-looking vehicle. 'Got that, Crumpton?'

Crumpton threw her arms in the air in defeat, and Frith couldn't quite suppress a smile at her discomfort. He turned the engine over, and the rest of the team did the same, the air choked with the whine of tiny but powerful engines. The more lumbering, slower snowcat chugged into life.

Without waiting for Frith's signal, Cassie gunned her snowmobile's engine and she darted forward at speed, a froth of snow spraying up behind her.

'Don't wait up!' Frith shouted over the noise, then powered his own vehicle forward.

Aristedes and Crumpton watched as the rescue team sped out of the village.

THE SONG of a pack of dogs howled through the morning as Aristedes walked across the village, battling against the wind that had whipped up out of nowhere since the rescue team had departed. Aristedes couldn't help but wonder if the huskies were still indeed huskies, or whether the radiation from the craft had got to them too. She shivered at the thought as she turned down the side a building leading to Iver's quarantine room, but then stopped. Something was wrong.

She began to run, the dry snow crunching beneath her feet bringing back a brief, happy memory of the first time she'd heard the satisfying sound of freshly fallen snow pressed down underfoot. She dismissed it quickly as that tight knot of dread in the pit of her stomach heightened her soldier's sense.

Tearing round the corner, she stumbled to a stop, almost landing flat on her face as her boots fought for purchase on the compacted ice.

God, no. Not another one.

Private Kirk lay face down in a spreading slush of scarlet snow, the awkward angle of his neck making his current state of health blatantly obvious. Trying not to gawp at the crushed bowl of what used to be the back of his head, Aristedes crept closer, examining the door. The seal had been broken. She pulled her side arm from its holster and

hopped over Kirk's body, moving slowly into the room with her gun raised.

All she found was an empty bed. There was no sign of Iver.

Satisfied the room was secure. Aristedes turned back to the doorway and ran her hand around the frame, closely examining the ruined seal. It had been ripped open from the inside. Her heart fell. A reinforced seal of case-hardened dynastream that could hold back a Cyberman had been smashed apart by a weak, skinny 11-year-old boy.

Aristedes loosened the strap on her rifle and pulled it round in front of her, loading it with a decisive action. She began to move slowly into the heart of the village.

‘THIS IS what you get for running off without me.’

Nimrod watched calmly, arms folded, as Cassie cut the power to her snowcat and turned to face her commanding officer. Above them, the hulk of the spacecraft towered away into the sky.

‘Im glad you’re learning to trust your senses, Cassie,’ said Nimrod. ‘Had Sergeant Frith been leading the way, he’d probably be dead by now.’

‘You’re like a bloody cat, you are,’ grunted Frith, climbing from his own snowcat. ‘How many lives are you on now?’ Behind them, the remainder of the rescue team was coming up fast. He began to trudge towards Nimrod, ready with a lecture about treatment of equipment, but was pulled sharp by a warning from Nimrod.

‘I wouldn’t come any further, Frith.’

‘What are you on about?’ the sergeant asked. ‘There’s nothing there.’

Nimrod bent down and picked up a scorched shard of burnt metal. With a deft flick of his hand, he hurled the jagged object straight at the confused soldier.

‘Oi! What do...’

The air fizzed and turned red hot for a split second. The debris disintegrated in a flash of sparks. The red haze lifted and the air returned to normal, aside from the acrid tang of hot metal.

The penny dropped in Frith’s eyes. ‘Oh. A force field.’

Nimrod clapped his gauntleted hands together, the thick sound even echoing above the wind.

‘Bravo, Frith. Sometimes I think I underestimate you.’

‘I hate force fields,’ muttered Frith as he watched Cassie move forward, a hand outstretched tentatively.

‘How did you manage to get through?’ she asked, stepping back as the air began to buzz angrily near her palm.

‘By destroying several hundred thousand pounds of military hardware. The destruction of Pegasus One must have shorted out the field for a split second. My armour and constitution shielded me from the worst of it, and I fell through. That’s the only rational explanation. On the whole, I don’t think it’s an experiment we can afford to repeat.’

‘Well, we can’t spend all evening gawping at you like some bloody lion in the zoo. Let’s see about getting you out.’

‘An excellent suggestion, Sergeant. What equipment do we have?’ Frith tapped the screen on his forearm and began to read off the manifest. The rest of the team were beginning to unload various canisters and metal cases. ‘Sonic-displacement generators, electromagnetic disrupters, some things that look like chrome bowling balls and countless other pieces of expensive technobabble that I can’t even pronounce let alone build.’ He looked at Nimrod. ‘That do you?’

‘For now. I can instruct you in the equipment’s operation from here. Let’s start with the sonic-displacement generators.’

Frith glanced at Cassie. ‘Here comes the science bit,’ he murmured, and Cassie found herself smiling, despite herself.

THE VILLAGE WAS on full alert. Every man who had not been assigned to the rescue team had been drafted into the hunt for Iver. After 30 minutes of searching, they still hadn’t found him. Altered DNA or not, the boy was good. Aristedes’s men were the best in the business - she’d been alongside them hunting down a lone grey in the New Forest, and that time they’d been assigned to harvesting a Slarvian at a peace conference. They fought primal fear and molecular-disruptor beams on a regular basis, but a small boy riddled with alien radiation was outwitting them.

Aristedes moved down the main drag of the village. To her right. Buchanan raised his gun into the air to attract her attention. The communication was silent, slick. He pointed at a crude, lean-to shed. She gave him a thumbs up, and together they began to creep slowly forward, the entrance of the structure always firmly in their sights.

With every step, she saw Iver’s sad, frightened eyes, and

remembered him squirming beneath Nimrod's questioning. And now she was tracking him behind the safety of an SA80. What a great way to earn a living.

From within the shed, they could hear a repeated clicking sound. Again and again. The two soldiers took up position on either side of the double doors. Aristedes nodded to Buchanan, and in one fluid movement they had pulled the doors aside and had their guns up and pointing into the shed.

He was sitting squat on a battered old snowmobile, clawed fingers curled round the key in the ignition. His eyes showed confusion as he kept turning the key, as if he almost remembered but couldn't quite muster the knowledge needed to fire the bike up. As Buchanan's shadow fell across him, Iver's head snapped around, jaundiced, watery eyes blazing in the half-light. Hair had sprouted all over his lumpy, distorted face and a single string of blood-red saliva hung loosely from blackened lips.

They stood, looking at each other - Aristedes erect and still, peering down the barrel of her gun; Iver hissing through yellow teeth. His eyes twitched, dancing from her to the door. He was a cornered animal, and he was dangerous.

As he began to swing himself off the snowmobile, Aristedes trigger finger tensed, squeezing on to the trigger with imperceptible pressure.

Iver's once-innocent face creased with sudden hatred and with eyes wide and bulging, he launched himself from the seat of the snowmobile, straight at Aristedes.

Her first shot shattered his shoulder instantly and he dropped to the floor, but the boy leapt back to his feet, arm hanging uselessly by his side. The second shot caused the front of his blue felt jacket to explode in a mass of tissue and blood. Aristedes kept looking at him, remembering the briefest of smiles he gave as she had helped him into the bed just hours before. The lips that had said thank you when she handed him a cup of soup curled into a snarl as she brought the butt of her rifle down on his neck. Her blow shattered his vertebrate and paralysed him long enough for her to plunge a standard-issue knife into his chest, just as Nimrod had ordered if they were to enter a combat situation with one of the augmented locals.

The creature that had once been Iver Dunfjeld gave one last rasping breath and then fell silent.

No child should ever suffer, Aristedes thought softly to herself as she drew herself up.

‘Corp.’ She had forgotten Buchanan. ‘You did the right thing.’

‘Yeah,’ she said quietly.

Crumpton came running up. She gave a cursory glance at the two soldiers and the shattered corpse, seemed satisfied that the threat had been neutralised, and carried on in her usual businesslike manner.

‘We’ve been summoned. Nimrod and Frith have need of our assistance at the crash site. I’ll get one of the men to bag the boy up ready for transport back to the Forge.’

Crumpton turned and trudged back the way she had come. Buchanan slung his rifle across his back, and began to kneel down towards Iver, but was stopped by Aristedes’s hand on his shoulder. ‘Leave it, Private,’ she said gently. ‘This is my job.’

Buchanan nodded silently and stood again, walking out of the shed and leaving his corporal alone to commence her grim task.

Breaking Down the Door

The pain lanced through his brain like a knife. Gripping his hands to his temples he fell to his knees, his body wracked with wave upon wave of agony. At the corner of his consciousness he was aware of Cassie calling out to him, but he was incapable of responding. All his strength, physical and mental, was required to fight off the telepathic talons that were digging into the deepest pits of his mind. Images flashed before him, both familiar and strange. He saw his own hands injecting a patient with a DNA-altering virus of his making and felt the searing pain of bullets ripping apart his own tissue as he writhed helplessly on a laboratory floor.

Faces burst into view, pressing down on him, crying out in abject terror, twisted gargoyles of days gone by. Victims each and every one, their names scored across his soul. And then in the midst of it all he saw an oasis of green sand beneath his hands as alien aromas invaded his senses and he lifted his face to see twin suns burning in the pink sky above.

But these weren't his memories. It wasn't even his world.

The roar filled his ears as he turned to see the shadow racing towards him, a gargantuan wall of nothingness rushing up to meet him, engulfing everything in its path. The screams vibrated through him as he raised his hands to protect himself from the encroaching void, crying out as it slammed into his body, snatching him up and sweeping him along, flotsam on a tidal wave of mental torture. And all around scenes from his life strobed, illuminated by a hidden, tumultuous storm, stark flashes of deeds best left forgotten.

Caught in the middle of the tempest he felt his skin turn inside out, his intestines spilling into the wind until his stripped, screaming skeleton was exposed to the elements. He thrashed hopelessly against the tide until the joints finally snapped under the pressure, the rotten bone fragmenting instantly. Suddenly Nimrod was nothing, mere dust

whipped into a fury by an unseen force, his mind laid bare for all to see. He relaxed, finally realising that there was nothing left to fight for and let himself fade into the cacophony, finding rest among the screams and lamentation.

Nimrod came to as somebody shouted his name across the snow. His name? That wasn't quite true though, was it? Slowly, the glare of insidious reality crept back into his perception. Feeling the snow crunch beneath him as he moved, Nimrod carefully unfurled himself from the foetal position he had adopted and cautiously opened his eyes, wincing at the harsh light that flooded his bruised senses.

He crouched, looking around him as he tried to pinpoint the location of the voice. It was like waking from a dream when you didn't even realise you'd been sleeping.

'What happened?' he croaked, attempting to push himself up to his feet. Usually sturdy legs threatened to pitch over and his stomach was turning cartwheels. The usually comforting sensation of Cassie's mind touching his own was like a razor blade scraping across his cerebral cortex. He recoiled under the force of her thoughts, the heartbeat of the telepathic link thunderous and overpowering.

'Please,' he begged, mindful of how uncharacteristically weak he appeared, 'too much mental pressure... too raw.' With a supreme effort, he severed contact.

Calming his raging senses through meditation, he opened his eyes again. He looked up at Cassie from his position cross-legged on the ground. She stood some way off, still separated by the force field. 'What happened?'

'You collapsed and had some kind of fit,' reported Cassie honestly. 'I couldn't get through to you.'

'Something made contact,' he said quietly, unsure if he was thinking the words or speaking them out loud. 'Something was playing with my mind, probing my defences, trying to strip them down. Not without success, it seems.'

'Do you think it was the same thing that attacked me?' asked Cassie, but they both knew the answer.

'Undoubtedly.' Nimrod turned to face the wrecked spacecraft behind him, looking up and down its jagged tower. 'We must be getting close.'

Somewhere, inside that steaming, scorched graveyard, an

intelligence lay waiting. They had orders to harvest this vessel, to plunder its secrets, for King and country.

What if their prey ended up harvesting them?

EVEN SNUG within her BAN suit, Crumpton could feel the wind pressing against her face as they roared forward, the snowcat leaping over the white dunes that lead to the crash site. She held on tightly behind Aristedes who expertly guided the machine onwards towards the horizon where the grey-blue sky met the ivory of the land.

A pang of homesickness cut deep within, as she watched a herd of reindeer, bells tinkling as they ran, move across the ice. Their farmer had no doubt abandoned them, ending up the way of the other locals. To think she had been excited by all this, the chance to escape the Forge and travel to an unfamiliar shore. But this was just a little too unfamiliar for her liking and, at present, the mission didn't seem to have an end in sight and was stained with blood. What had they actually achieved since they arrived? The discovery of a ghost town, the loss of two loyal men and the destruction of one of their transports. They'd call it collateral damage, of course, but that didn't make it feel any better.

'Doctor,' Aristedes called over shoulder. 'Look!'

Crumpton came out of her idling thoughts and looked to where Aristedes pointed a gloved hand.

They were everywhere, lurching and slipping on the ice as they stumbled forward. Over a hundred shambling figures, all heading in the direction of the craft as if it were calling to them like a siren. So many people - so many lives - snatched away and controlled by heaven knows what. Crumpton was sickened. The texts she had read on the journey over here had repeatedly stated that the Sami were a struggling people, clinging for dear life to their traditions and lifestyles, fighting against the tsunami of western culture that threatened to wipe them out. In just a few days whatever had landed here had stolen their very souls, making a joke of their fierce battle. The feelings of despair that had minutes ago gnawed away at her stomach twisted into anger, a fury that something had come to her world that could treat people with such disregard, manipulating them into mere tools.

Aristedes slowed the snowcat to a halt, and the soldier and

scientist watched the herd of drones continue their silent march, accompanied by the piercing cry of a crow flying above like the plaintive cry of a raped environment. You could almost taste the feeling of loss in the air, of lives abruptly cut short.

‘You were right, Doctor,’ Aristedes called out. ‘They’re not just zombies. They look like they have a purpose. Iver must have been trying to follow them, to join...’

‘To join the rest of his people, yes,’ Crumpton completed the sentence, placing a comforting hand on the corporal’s shoulder. ‘Come on, we’d better get a move on. It won’t be too long before they catch up.’

Nodding, Aristedes fired the throttle of the snowcat and in a flurry of snow they began to move forward again, weaving in and out of the unearthly procession.

‘TURN IT Off, turn it off!’ shouted Frith over a piercing whine as smoke began to spew from the squat box they had placed on the ground in front of the force field. Private Dann hit a switch on the side of the box, and began to waft the smoke away with his hand.

‘It’s no good, sir,’ he said, trying to be as helpful as possible.

‘I can see that, Private,’ snapped Frith, his already terrible humour deteriorating even further. He looked over to where Nimrod sat, cross-legged and eyes closed. Facing him, Cassie mirrored his pose, sat on the opposite of the force field. Some kind of telepathic love-in.

‘Right.’ Frith sighed. ‘Let’s try the next one.’ As soldiers began to move the box out of the way, he looked at his watch. Where the bloody hell was Crumpton?

As if in answer, a slow whine came out of the silence and the snow cat carrying Aristedes and the doctor zipped into view. They came to a stop in a flurry of snow.

‘About bloody time,’ he said as the pair clambered off the vehicle and trudged up to them.

Nimrod opened one eye. ‘Ah, Crumpton. Perfect timing. I think Frith was thinking of beating the force field down with his bare hands.’

‘We ran into some of our mentally challenged friends on the way,’ Aristedes reported as Crumpton stepped to one side and began to assess the situation.

‘Great. That’s all we need,’ groaned Frith.

‘They’re moving slowly, but they’ll get here eventually.’

‘Okay. Let’s brief the troops and leave the scientists to it.’

‘I’M WORRIED ABOUT HIM. Doctor,’ Cassie said, passing another piece of equipment to Crumpton. The doctor slotted it into the sonic disruptor and flicked a number of switches on the control panel.

‘Worried about whom?’ she asked, not even bothering to look up.

‘Nimrod. Who else?’ replied Cassie.

Crumpton chuckled slightly. ‘We all worry about Nimrod,’ she said soothingly, making an adjustment on a piece of equipment. ‘It’s an occupational hazard.’

‘That psychic attack took a lot out of him. I can feel it. He’s uneasy.’

‘Yes, your brief report made for interesting listening. Try not to worry. When the time comes, we all need to concentrate on doing the right thing. You’ll be there for him when he needs you.’ She smiled across at Cassie reassuringly, and she was surprised when the girl smiled back.

Crumpton returned to the task in hand and made a final connection. She twisted a dial and the disruptor began to hum. ‘Now, let’s have another go at this,’ she said decisively. ‘Stand back, dear.’

Cassie stepped behind Crumpton as she twisted a dial on the sonic disruptor. Immediately, a circle of air turned red and the force field began to fizz and shimmer as a barrage of sonic beams hit it.

Crumpton looked hopefully down at the device’s readings. If she could weaken a localised area of the shield, she could try to punch her way through in an attempt to short it out, albeit temporarily, it would be a start.

‘Is it working?’ asked Cassie.

‘I think so, yes,’ announced Crumpton excitedly. ‘Now, all I need to do is up the output...’ She cranked the dial up another couple of notches and the whine from the machinery intensified. Before them, the air was filling with a minute storm of blue electricity as the force field struggled to deflect the attack.

‘We’re doing it, Cassie. Resistance levels are falling. We’re breaking through!’

With a sharp crack and a flash of yellow light, the side of the

disruptor buckled, firing out a spray of brilliant sparks that sizzled as they tumbled into the snow. There was a flash in the air and the electrical storm vanished. Crumpton's heart sank as smoke rose from the remains of the disruptor.

'Back to the drawing board?' offered Cassie meekly, drawing a sad shake of the head from Crumpton.

'We broke the drawing board several hours ago.'

As the smoke twisted up into the air. Cassie turned her attention back to the figure of Nimrod, who was now skulking some distance away in the shadow of the massive craft.

'Why is he blocking me out?' she said, half to herself, but Crumpton picked up on it as she began to sift through the wreckage.

'I think you're feeling left out,' she observed candidly. 'This presence, whatever it is, made contact with you first. Now it would appear to have turned its attention to Nimrod.'

'Are you telling me I'm jealous?'

Crumpton pursed her lips 'Possibly. I think he's protecting you, shielding you from attack.'

'Why is he doing that?'

'Because he cares.'

Cassie looked at Crumpton, dumbfounded, but couldn't think of anything to say.

'Try not to worry,' continued Crumpton. 'He's got everything under control.'

Crumpton wondered if she actually believed that herself as she turned back to the remains of the sonic disruptor. Cassie didn't answer but continued gazing out over the ice, anxiety etched across her face, anxiety that Crumpton mirrored. They had tried everything and yet still couldn't touch this dratted force field. It didn't help that a battalion of desperate drones would be on top of them any minute now. They had tried everything in their box of tricks, but had drawn nothing but blanks. She needed a helping hand.

A flash of activity caught her attention and she turned to see the snow on the other side of the shield buck up. The surface broke and a tiny dot of a nose pushed its way up. As the rabbit burrowed its way from its subterranean hiding hole to the cold light of day, a smile began to spread across her face.

'You know,' she began, not caring if Cassie was listening or not,

‘we know that the force field covers the land above the ground, but I wonder if it reaches beneath it?’

Cassie turned back to fix the doctor with a questioning look. ‘What do you mean?’

Crumpton stood and slapped her on the back, excitement revitalising her spirits.

‘Just a theory, Cassie, and one we should check out straight away.’

As they hurried off, Crumpton winked at the small white rabbit that was nervously sniffing the air.

‘Thanks, Bugs. You may just have saved the day.’

Ghosts of the Past

The theatre smelt of recently polished wood. Nimrod shut the door quietly behind him and crept into the auditorium, hugging the shadows of the wall as he took in the scene that was being rehearsed up on the stage. In the back of his mind, a doubt niggled away at him that this wasn't right and he should be somewhere else. He shook it off. The importance of the occasion was making him nervous. In just half an hour it would be over and the last of them would be nothing more than red slime rolling down cheap scenery. Another chapter closed.

The actors onstage stumbled over their lines and looked out into the gloom of the auditorium for help. In the third row of the stalls, a tall, gaunt figure stood up, waving his hands dramatically above his head. Nimrod smiled grimly in recognition and felt the arm that carried his crossbow flex. William Moore, aka Twilight Five. Back in the Great War he'd organised variety shows to keep the men happy, until he'd been found with his fingers in the general's silver cupboard and something else in the general's secretary.

Nimrod should have guessed that he'd end up doing something like this, with Matthew whoring himself to Reggie Mead at the Dusk for the funds. This wasn't Matthew's scene at all, but he'd do anything for his beloved William. The bolt clicked into place beneath Nimrod's fingers. Out of all of them, he'd wanted to leave William and Matthew to the last, not because he savoured their demise but because he knew they were completely harmless. They didn't feed on humans and lived a cosy existence here in this renovated Bristol theatre house away from prying eyes, but orders were orders and William's name was the last on his list.

'I think we've done enough for tonight,' William was saying, his thin voice as weedy as Nimrod remembered. 'If we keep on trying we'll just keep on going round in circles. Get yourselves home and work on those lines. I'll see you tomorrow morning.'

Nimrod watched in silence as the actors bade their farewells, leaving

William alone on the stage. If only they knew the true nature of their director.

The tall man ran fingers through his lank hair and stared out into the darkness of the theatre, his shoulders falling. Under the harsh lights, Nimrod could see the sadness etched into every line of his face, the loneliness of a man whose lover had not returned home.

It was about time Nimrod helped to reunite them.

William started as soon as Nimrod broke from the shadows. He didn't bolt as the hunter leapt to the stage, clearing the first few rows of seats in a single bound. He didn't even budge as Nimrod raised his crossbow to catch him in his sights. He merely closed his eyes and waited.

The bolt tore through his heart and William's twitching body hit the boards. Nimrod watched in silence as the last of the Twilight vampires began to convulse, his flesh hissing as it started to expand and bubble. In the early days, he'd watched fascinated as the vampires died, but the novelty had worn thin very quickly.

There but for the grace of...

As Twilight Five blossomed outwards in an arc of viscous red matter, Nimrod had already turned and jumped off the stage and was walking calmly up the aisle. As he neared the doors, he turned back to take one last look...

... and found himself staring into the black wall of the alien spacecraft. He blinked, shaking his head as if waking from a dream, which to all intents and purposes he had. Steadying himself on the twisted metal of the craft he took in his surroundings, the brilliant blanket of snow banishing the fading memory. The flashbacks were getting worse, ghosts of the past feeling solid and real. Something was rifling through his memories, piecing together the events that made him who - or what - he was.

It was time to concentrate on the here and now. Looking around the exposed hull of the ship, his keen eyes alighted on a barely noticeable light, a rhythmic blink of red.

He consulted the screen set into the polycarbide armour of his forearm. He quickly activated a scanning sweep, and swept his arm along the length of the hull. The screen showed him a vein of interconnected power running across the metal wall, passing through nodes at several points across the surface. 'Power source detected' flashed the screen helpfully. Force-field generators, perhaps?

Ignoring the seductive telepathy that threatened to lure him back to the past, he fished an object from within the folds of his coat.

‘ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS, Doctor?’ Frith asked, watching as Crumpton swept the scanner over the frozen surface.

‘Of course I’m not, Sergeant,’ Crumpton snapped back, ‘but progress is based on leaps of faith and logic. That’s all we’ve got left.’ She ignored Frith’s aggravated roll of his eyes. ‘But this could be our best shot. According to the readings, we are standing on a massive frozen lake.’

‘How comforting!’

‘A lake that continues well beyond the force field. All we have to do is tunnel our way in under the field’s scope of influence.

‘That seems a little bit easy.’

‘The best ideas usually are. All the toys we have at our disposal sometimes mask the fact that all we really needed was a couple of shovels. Or a nice big explosive charge. Thought that might be more your style, Frith.’

‘Crumpton, sometimes I could kiss you.’

Before Frith could respond, Cassie cut across his bluster.

‘Charges ready and primed.’ Cassie was grinning through her mask as she ran up.

‘As Agent Schofield seems to be enjoying herself so much, would you do the honours?’ Frith asked Cassie, holding up a small remote handset.

‘Thought you’d never ask,’ she said, eagerly taking the device.

Frith spoke into his radio mic. ‘Fire in the hold! Repeat, fire in the hold!’ Satisfied that his men had taken cover, Frith turned to Cassie. ‘In your own time,’ he said, folding his arms as Cassie depressed a button on the remote.

The ground shook, followed by a dull booming, and a plume of snow and ice flew up some distance away. The crack of the explosion echoed around the landscape, scaring a flock of birds into the air nearby.

‘One hole, as ordered,’ announced Cassie enthusiastically and the trio began to trudge back towards the shield.

‘Excellent,’ Crumpton said, eyes sparkling, ‘Now, Cassie, how about taking a dip?’

AS SHE PLUNGED into the murky depths beneath the ice, Cassie suddenly realised she was holding her breath, it was amazing that even after all this time she couldn't quite get her head round the fact she was undead.

She clicked on the torch clamped to her wrist, and looked at the heads-up display the BAN suit threw up to help guide her through the murky waters. With a powerful kick of her legs, she pushed herself forward through the dark waters, watching as the distance counted down, tracing a line parallel to the translucent ice above. Finally, just as the eerie silence of the water was beginning to rattle her, the suit confirmed that she had gone far enough and slowly, so as not to drop it, she extracted the small pick from her side pocket. Fighting against the resistance of the water she swung the instrument up to strike on the underside of the surface, the dull sound of metal against ice muffled in this sub-marine world. A few flakes of ice floated away from the impact point, but the damage didn't seem enough. She tried again and again, putting her full force against each blow, but still the ice refused to crack.

Cursing, she brought the pick up for a final strike and felt the shock travel down her arm as it broke in two on impact, its gleaming head spinning away into the darkness below. She slammed her fists uselessly against the opaque wall before giving up and beginning the swim back to the hole. They'd need something stronger than an ice pick.

IN THE OLD DAYS, Nimrod would have struggled to simply rewire the generators, attempting to strip down alien technology in a painstakingly detailed study. The last few years had taught him that at times, like now, the more pragmatic approach should be embraced. They could study later. Now they needed to act.

The magnetic clasp of the bomb attached itself with a clunk to the side of the hull, just below the blinking pinprick of light where Nimrod hung fifty feet above the ground by one powerful arm. He could feel a small, still voice encouraging him, seductively persuading him that this was the right course of action.

The device in place, Nimrod slid back down the smooth side of the hull and thudded nimbly onto both feet. He brought his arm up and slid a finger across the screen, instantly priming the bomb for

destruction. In a twisted, mechanical echo of his own voice the charge began to count down.

‘Detonation in thirty seconds. 29, 28, 27...’

Nimrod began to sprint around the perimeter of the ship, not waiting around to see the destructive effects of his handiwork.

‘ANY SIGN OF THEM?’ Frith barked into his communicator. The answer to Frith’s question didn’t improve his mood.

‘Ever seen *Day of the Dead*, Sarge?’ quipped Aristedes over the channel. ‘Because right now we could mount a remake.’

‘How long before they join the picnic?’

‘ETA: 45 minutes, give or take.’

‘Brilliant. Hold them back as long as you can and if I were you...’

‘Sir?’

‘Don’t wait until you see the whites of their eyes before you shoot. Frith out.’

Crumpton was fussing over the explosives that Cassie was preparing to attach to the underside of the ice in another dive attempt.

‘Why didn’t I go into green grocery?’ Frith wondered aloud as he joined his colleagues. ‘Right, ladies, we’d better get moving otherwise we’re going be crawling with ghouls any second.’

Glaring, Cassie grabbed a fresh explosive from Crumpton’s hand and walked to the hole, plunging feet first back into the water without another word.

‘What’s her problem?’ Frith asked with a ‘What did I do?’ look.

‘Have you never heard of the theory of more haste, less speed?’ said Crumpton, looking down into the dark hole.

‘Well, unless you want to become a zombie’s lunch...’

‘How many more times do you have to be told, Frith? These aren’t zombies we’re dealing with...’

Frith turned his back on her and strolled towards the shield, one hand raised in front of him. The air sparkled as his palm met the invisible wall.

‘Whatever, Doctor. As long as I can keep myself away from their filthy bodies I’ll be happy. How long should it take for her to set the explosives?’

‘Five minutes tops. She should be at the target right about -’

A series of explosions in the distance caused Frith's head to snap up.

‘What the... Has she...’

He never had chance to finish the sentence. One minute the force field was there, the next it blazed brightly for a second and then the shield that sparkled around his fingers disappeared. Taken by surprise, he pitched forward, taking in a mouthful of snow as he landed face down.

‘Explosives set,’ Cassie reported as she pulled herself up from the hole blasted into the ice, and then she saw the prone security chief sprawling on the floor. She smirked as he began to clamber to his feet and regain his wounded pride.

‘Thank you. Cassie,’ said Crumpton. ‘I think your early bath might have been unnecessary.’

NIMROD WATCHED with grim satisfaction as the glowing veins of power showing on his wrist monitor blinked and faded. Even from his vantage point of safety, Nimrod felt the rumble deep within the ship and saw as the force field shorted out. A swell of satisfaction welled up within, making him almost dizzy with joy. He'd done it. The shield was down and they could finally break free...

He stopped himself mid-thought. Break free? Was that his feeling, or...

The bleached hairs on the back of his neck ruffled as he realised that the euphoria he was experiencing wasn't his own but was leaking from whatever was trapped within the confines of the wreckage. Doubts swarmed through his mind, questioning whether they had been right to attempt this.

‘Nimrod to Frith,’ he barked into his communicator, more angry with himself than the creature that was playing with his mind.

‘Frith here,’ crackled the response. ‘What the hell are you playing at?’

‘Opening the door,’ he rumbled. ‘Lock onto my position,’ he snapped, cutting Frith short, ‘and regroup. We have an alien spacecraft to investigate.’

Alone on the ice, Nimrod stared at the mass of metal before him. The ship stared back, unmovable and unwelcoming.

Descent

‘So let’s get this straight,’ said Frith, hands on hips. ‘You want us to stay up here like sitting ducks, with a hoard of DNA-challenged zombies almost on top of us, while the five of you wander into hell’s mouth to have a quick recce to see what you can nick?’

‘A concise summary of the situation, Frith. Thank you.’ Nimrod faced the sergeant, while behind him Crumpton, Cassie, Aristedes and the ever-keen Private Dann prepared for their descent into the ship. A black gash that the team had managed to rip into the side of the vessel with explosives ran in a jagged line.

Frith sighed and threw his arms up in resignation. ‘Ah, well. When in Rome.’ He hefted his rifle and turned to the assembled members of the team. ‘All right, lads, you heard the man,’ he shouted clearly, his command skills taking over. ‘I want a perimeter running in a semicircle twenty feet from the big hole in the wall that’s about to be used as a door. You know what we’re up against, so prepare to engage the enemy with economic fire. I don’t want anybody going off half-cocked and wasting ammo. Understood?’

‘Yes, sir!’ the soldiers thundered as one. In one shared movement they turned to follow Frith’s orders to the letter.

Frith gave Aristedes a reassuring wink, and she nodded back, before Frith ran off to supervise his team.

Next to Aristedes, Private Dann looked up at the domineering hulk of the ship with wide eyes. ‘You all right, Private?’ she asked, as gently as her rank would allow. These were professional soldiers and they had a job to do.

Dann made an effort and swallowed visibly before nodding. ‘Yes, ma’am. Can’t wait to get going.’

Aristedes laughed. ‘We’ll soon beat that out of you.’ Dann whitened. ‘Only joking. Just keep your eyes and ears open and you’ll be fine. Chances are, the team will be having a worse time of it up

here. Come on.'

Nimrod, Crumpton and Cassie were just stepping into the void. One by one, they were swallowed up by the darkness in seconds. Dann squared his shoulders in an attempt to pull himself together and took one last look at his teammates preparing for battle, before putting one foot in front of the other and stepping into the unknown.

'DOCTOR? Is there a problem?'

Crumpton jumped at the sound of Nimrod's voice. They had been descending down a narrow corridor for around 15 minutes in silence, and in the dead, cloying atmosphere, Nimrod's deep rasp was a stark beacon. Even Cassie had managed to shut up for the duration, and was gaping around the smooth walls in silent awe as torch beams shone in bright cones through the dark.

No, sir,' she replied. 'Why do you ask?'

You look uneasy.'

'Uneasy?' Crumpton laughed, a little too quickly. 'We're walking into the heart of an alien spacecraft with no idea what we're going to encounter. Uneasy doesn't really begin to cover it.'

Of course she was feeling uneasy, but there was something else. She'd been present on countless missions, picked her way through slimy corridors and picked away at the gooey remains of an alien torso, but had never felt like this.

There was a fist hammering at her chest, an overpowering sense of dread that threatened to envelop her. She was fighting off the sensation by running through simple equations in her head, but that didn't mean she couldn't as easily turn round and run screaming back to the surface. She'd take on a pack of genetically altered Sami any day.

And there was another thing - this might be an alien spacecraft, but it was incredibly *dull*. Metre after metre of flat, featureless corridor. Where were the controls, glyphs, or even a - she thought with a smile - coffee machine, to show that there was some need for life somewhere in this sprawling structure.

She shone her torch around the subtle curvature of the wall. She had thought that the metal was a solid black, but the sheen around it was now giving off halos of emerald and burgundy under the clinical glare of their torch beams. Must remember to take a sample back to

the Forge, she thought. As she walked, Crumpton brushed a hand lazily across the wall. The metal was smooth, the touch of her hand hardly meeting any resistance. Barely any friction at all, in fact. Definitely alien. Her eyes flickered across the burnished surface, searching for imperfections or joins, anything to show her that this structure had been constructed by human, or at least humanoid, hands. Nothing. The perfection was as unnatural as the smell that tickled her nostrils.

She knew intellectually that it was culture shock but the knowledge was doing nothing to ease the growing panic in the pit of her stomach. She took a deep breath of stale air, attempting to fight down the rising fear.

Was she a danger to the team? Maybe she should go back to the surface, provide back-up to Frith. Did they really need a scientist down here with -

‘Over here, sir. Look!’

It was Cassie who had found something in the gloom ahead. Crumpton swung her torch around, tracing Cassie’s position, glad of the distraction from her maddening thoughts. As the beam of light rested on Cassie’s discovery, she almost gagged, bile rising in her throat. The unease she’d felt returned tenfold. And to think, she’d been worried about the walls.

FRITH WAS DYING FOR A CIGARETTE, but he’d smoked his last about half an hour ago. With a wistful thought, he wondered where the nearest newsagents was. Crumpton had been trying to get him to give up, but he maintained it was pretty much his only genuine pleasure in a pretty shitty life.

He raised binoculars to his eyes and adjusted the focusing. The horizon was thick with the approach of the zombies - and he was refusing to call them anything else, okay? The lumbering, shambling figures were all merging into one as they clawed their way forward across the ice. Still, thought Frith, he might be able to bum a fag off one of them.

Frith dropped the binoculars down to his chest with a sigh. So this is how he’d finally go: defending a lump of alien crap while shooting zombies and freezing his knackers off.

Ah, well, it beat the dole queue.

‘Okay, lads, brace yourselves. I reckon we’ve got five minutes max before the walking dead are knocking on our door.’

His rifle felt comfortable against his shoulder as he brought it up and aimed, ready to splatter the brains of the first zombie who came near enough. Around him, Frith could sense the rest of the troops taking up the same position.

THE FIRST CORPSE was perfectly bisected, its torso flung against the wall while its legs lay twisted a couple of metres away. The second lay face down on the slick floor, which, Aristedes noticed, you could plainly see through the massive hole that was torn in the middle of the poor man’s back.

Nimrod kicked absently at a grey, dead hand with his boot. ‘Desiccated. Completely drained of blood,’ he noted, not without a tone of irony in his voice.

‘They’re both Sami,’ commented Aristedes, taking in the mixture of traditional felt and modern synthetic arctic gear. ‘How did they get in here?’

‘Judging from these markings, I’d say they were dragged down the corridor.’ Nimrod let his torch flick to the right to illustrate his point, highlighting the smears of dried blood that covered the wall like smeared palm prints of a small child.

‘After they’d been killed?’ Cassie asked, crouched down beside the bodies like a faithful retriever.

‘Difficult to say in these conditions.’

‘No,’ continued Aristedes on a different train of thought. ‘You misunderstand. I mean how did they get past the force field.’

‘Perhaps it wasn’t there when they arrived,’ offered Crumpton, tapping data into her suit’s computer. ‘There’s every chance that when the ship crashed its systems were scrambled. Perhaps it took some time for the survivors to throw up the shields.’

‘Survivors?’ It was Dann’s turn to speak, the shock in his voice causing him to sound more like a small child than ever.

‘Somebody must have erected the force field.’

‘Not necessarily,’ rumbled Nimrod. ‘The shield may have been part of an automatic defence system, to protect itself from prying eyes. It’s doubtful that anything could survive a disaster like this.’

Crumpton stepped closer to the bodies, shining her torch over the

grisly remains. 'There's nothing automatic about these injuries. They display an outward and active level of violence of an intensity that I've never experienced before. And then we have the fact that they've been drained of blood. Somebody or *something* did this.'

There was an uncomfortable silence as the five members of the team all stared at each other, taking in the new information. Nimrod's radio crackled into life, breaking the stalemate. The rest of the team were patched into the communication circuit, and heard the hiss of static in their earpieces as he thumbed open a channel from the touch-sensitive controls set into the forearm of his armour.

'Nimrod.'

'In danger of repeating myself -' Frith's voice sounded tinny and electronic across the static-filled transmission we have a problem up here.'

'What now?' Nimrod snapped, his irritation obvious in his tone. 'There's more of these zombies than we thought. I reckon there's about 150 of the bloody things, with more behind them. It's like undead pride up here.'

Aristedes stifled a smile, remembering why she liked Frith so much. The joke was lost on Nimrod. 'You need to hold them off. Sergeant.'

'Tell that to General Custer. We're outnumbered. Even if we could drop them with one shot, we'll run out of ammo before we run out of zombies. We're going to get our arses kicked.'

'And what would you like me to do about that?' asked Nimrod, impatience rising in his metallic baritone.

'Some help wouldn't go amiss,' crackled Frith.

'Very well. In the meantime, I suggest you start shooting.'

Before Frith could return fire, Nimrod cut the connection with a flourish. He turned to Cassie.

'Cassie,' Nimrod ordered, 'I want you back on the surface. I believe Sergeant Frith is in need of your services.'

'But, sir,' the young vampire replied. 'I will be more use to you down here. These corridors are dark and...'

'My eyes are just as strong as yours. Cassie.'

'With due respect, I'm sure Frith can handle a few ghouls,' Cassie said, drawing herself up in a misguided attempt to match Nimrod's height. 'He doesn't need me to hold his hand when he takes them

down. Besides -'

'Besides nothing!' Nimrod hollered, causing everyone in the corridor to wince. For a second Aristedes thought Private Dann was going to drop his rifle in fright. At least he would know never to question Nimrod in the field. 'Agent Schofield, I have given you an order and I expect you to follow it. And I suggest you run. Do I make myself clear?'

They stood for seconds, staring each other down, Cassie breathing heavily in subdued anger. Eventually she broke the silence.

'Yes, sir.'

Without another word and clutching her BAN suit helmet in her hands, Cassie turned and disappeared into the darkness, the sound of her footsteps swallowed up quickly as she began to run.

'Shall we move on, people?' Nimrod said finally, shining his own torch away from the bodies into the never-ending darkness. He began to stride away with a swish of leather and dull thud of heavy boots on metal. Crumpton followed after him, and Aristedes indicated that Dann should carry on ahead, while she brought up the rear. As they left the two corpses behind them, both soldiers gripped their rifles a little closer to their chests.

Attack of the Dead

Cassie ran at full pelt from the hole in the side of the ship, still smarting from being dismissed like a naughty child by Nimrod.

As she emerged into the daylight, she paused only to pull down the visor of her BAN suit helmet, although, judging by the position of the sun, she wouldn't need it for much longer. The day would soon be over.

She looked around quickly to assess the situation. Forge soldiers were arranged in a defensive perimeter, Sergeant Frith at their head, gazing into the near distance through a pair of binoculars. Not too far away could be seen the shambling, dotted figures of the approaching locals.

Cassie jogged up to Frith, who lowered the binoculars and glared at her. 'You're the help?' he asked incredulously.

'Deal with it. I'm worth at least five of your men, Frith, and you know it.'

'Guess we're going to find out just how hard you really are. We've got about a minute before the local footie supporters are in range.'

'Sounds great.'

Frith laughed in spite of himself. Cassie could sense that he was secretly glad she was with them. If anybody could hold their own in a fight, it was her. He turned to address his men.

'All right, lads, listen up. Hostiles are about a minute away. I want economical, clean shooting. We don't know how many of these uglies are going to come running out of the woodwork, and we don't have unlimited ammo. This isn't a movie, so no going mad. If you're lucky, one shot in the old ticker should be enough to drop one of these bastards. Understood?'

As one, the men responded with an aggressive, 'Sarge!'

'Good lads! Stand by!'

The air filled with the staccato cocking of weapons. Frith looked

down at Cassie.

‘And that goes for you too. I don’t want you going berserk on me. Wouldn’t do to forget which monster I’m supposed to be shooting at.’ Cassie met his gaze full on and pulled her own rifle round, cocking it with a determined action. ‘Just watch your own back, Frith.’

THE DOOR GROANED ASIDE with an obligatory whine of hydraulics and sigh of compressed air. Shards of white torchlight probed into the room, picking out the angular metal walls. From somewhere unseen, the room, bathed mostly in shadow, was lit by a dim light source.

The torch beams picked out more detail as they moved in a complete circle around the room.

‘Secured.’ Aristedes turned to Nimrod and Crumpton, lowering her rifle. Dann did the same.

‘That makes me feel safe,’ Crumpton grumbled, moving into the centre of the chamber. Nimrod stood unmoving, eyes darting from side to side, taking in everything. Aristedes and Dann could only stand there awkwardly as the scientists did their work.

Crumpton approached a squat, metal stack in the centre of the chamber that came up to just over waist height. As her eyes grew accustomed to the light, she could see that it was covered in indentations, like somebody had pushed their fingers and hands into melted tar and let it set. An interface of some kind?

‘I’m no expert, but could this be a flight deck?’

‘We’ve seen no evidence of interactivity anywhere else in the ship,’ mused Nimrod. ‘The doors open automatically, as if something was keeping track of our progress. However, there’s no evidence here of any facilities for crew comfort or...’

Crumpton placed a thumb and forefinger into two indentations on the metal stack. Immediately, a hum filled the chamber and the illumination grew brighter for a second. Across one wall, a panel flared with light, growing in intensity before losing whatever power had brought it to life and falling dead.

Crumpton pulled her hand away quickly.

Nimrod strode forward and looked over the stack. ‘Fascinating. Crumpton, do that again.’

Crumpton repeated exactly the same movement, placing thumb and finger into the same holes.

Nothing happened.

‘What did I do?’ she asked, bewildered.

‘Made contact, perhaps?’ pondered Nimrod.

‘I don’t follow.’

‘This is the only area of the ship that appears to display any form of interactivity,’ continued Nimrod. ‘At some point, this area had contact with a living being.’

‘A crew?’ Dann piped up.

‘Possibly, but I doubt it. As I said, we’ve seen no evidence of facilities for a crew. Everything, apart from this sole area, is totally automated.’

‘Conclusion?’ asked Crumpton, warming to the theme.

Nimrod ran a gloved hand over the stack. ‘Even if the ship is automated, there has to be some method of entering data, of programming this vessel.’ He stopped, thinking. ‘I think this is the ship’s computer system.’

Crumpton looked at him with something close to admiration. He might look like a monster, but he was still a brilliant scientist. ‘Yes!’ she enthused. ‘That makes sense.’

‘If we are right, this is our best means of gaining information. We need to access the computer.’

‘Easier said than done,’ said Crumpton, arching an eyebrow.

‘Indeed.’ Nimrod delved into the fold of his coat and produced a slim, square, padlike object.

‘Your brought your PDA down here? Forgotten a dinner date?’ asked Aristedes, grinning. Nimrod ignored her as he keyed a sequence on the surface of the pad. A screen lit up on the surface.

‘Oracle, online.’

‘Standing by.’ Oracle’s voice sounded tinny piped through the equipment’s speaker.

Crumpton narrowed her eyes. ‘Portable Oracle unit? You kept that one quiet.’

Nimrod looked almost pleased. ‘You don’t know everything about what happens at the Forge, Crumpton. We can usually keep in contact with Oracle through our communication network, but this unit brings much of her system’s functionality with it.’

‘They can do anything these days, can’t they?’ Dann whispered to Aristedes, who shook her head.

‘Shut it, Dann. Now isn’t the time.’

‘Oracle,’ said Nimrod, ‘bring virtual interface software online.’

‘Complying.’ The screen on the pad flared as a hologram coalesced above it, spinning round on its axis.

Nimrod moved determinedly across the chamber. ‘Crumpton. I want you to work with Oracle to find a way to access the ship’s computer systems.’

‘You’re leaving me alone?’

‘No, Crumpton, Oracle will babysit you.’ As Nimrod joined Aristedes and Dann, a second door slid apart, revealing a passageway that led even deeper into the ship. The two soldiers brought their weapons to bear and covered either side of the door, training taking over again. ‘And besides, I’m probably the nastiest thing you’ll encounter down here.

Nimrod turned and strode into the blackness, his dark shape quickly swallowed up. Without looking back, Aristedes and Dann followed, the light from their torches dancing around for a few seconds before they too were doused out by the darkness beyond.

Crumpton sighed, hands on hips. ‘That doesn’t make me feel any better!’ she shouted down the corridor, but the only response was the door grinding closed.

Trying to ignore the darkness that threatened to seep into the limited light source, Crumpton turned to the squat, metal stack. Suddenly she was aware of how tense she really was, and arched her back to pull the knots taut.

As she straightened, the butt of her gun dug painfully into her hip. If she was going to do this, she’d make sure she was comfortable, that was for certain. With a sigh of relief, she flipped the buckle on her gunbelt, placing the weapon next to Nimrod’s portable unit. The sooner she got started...

‘Right then, Oracle...’

‘Standing by. Dr Crumpton.’

CASSIE HEARD the ghouls’ head pop between her hands. As it crumpled to the floor before her, she gazed around the ice. This was like something out of a seriously messed-up movie, the kind of stuff her dad used to like watching before he’d left home.

All around, soldiers seemed to be forgetting their training and

breaking cover to charge at the lumbering hordes of the whatever-they-were. Not that she could blame them. Where were they all coming from? Had every village in the neighbourhood gone through the same transformation as Iver's? From the sheer number of lurching, twitching zombies she'd guess so, and as much as she hated to admit it maybe Frith had been right. They were hideously outnumbered and the situation was getting worse.

'Cassie!' Frith yelled from his position behind a stalagmite of ebony metal that had erupted from the snow. 'What the bloody hell do you think you're doing just standing there? Get in there and give it to them before they give it to you!' He loosed a shot off into the distance and one of the creatures dropped with a keening scream.

She came to her senses and looked around. Sighting the nearest zombie to her, she launched herself into the air with a blood-curdling cry. She connected with the sound of bones crunching and they crashed down on to the ice. But the thing was too quick for her. With unexpected agility it grabbed her suit and, using the momentum of the fall rolled her under it. For a second the full weight of its foul bulk was on top of her, crushing down, as milky, weeping eyes stared sightlessly into her visor. She pitched and struggled, but the creature countered every move. These things were getting faster *and* stronger.

With a roar of anger, Cassie twisted sharply right, dislodging the thing from on top of her. Before it could right itself, Cassie sprung from the ground and landed, her knee pressed down sharply into its windpipe. The snow reflected in her knife's blade as she pulled it from her belt. It glinted in the fading sunlight before finding a home between the thing's eyes. As she felt the skull split and the blade slide into the pulp of its brain, the creature flailed for a second.

In one fluid movement, she pulled the blade back once again and plunged it deep into the dazed thing's chest, bursting its heart. The sound of her breathing was deafeningly loud in her helmet as Cassie yanked the knife free and wiped the ichor from the steel. One down...

'Darlin', I'm impressed. You're a fast learner.'

Jumping at the voice, Cassie snapped around, knife raised and ready to attack. Eyes widening, she felt the hilt slip from her fingers and land harmlessly in the snow beside her feet.

'No.' She breathed out, staring at the figure standing before her. 'You're dead.'

The cold wind flapped the jacket of his sharply cut suit as those pearly white teeth she had learnt to hate so much grinned at her with undisguised menace. Absently, he wiped a massive spade of a hand though his greasy, slick hair as he began to stride towards her.

‘Don’t I get a hug? What’s the matter, babe, you not happy to see old Reggie Mead?’

ARISTEDES CRANED her neck and looked up at the massive metal barrier that had halted their progress into the rest of the ship. The corridor had continued for some distance, featureless and smooth, and then they had come to this: the corridor had opened out into a highly vaulted room, an antechamber of some kind. While other doors had slid aside to allow them through, the slab of metal on the other side of this room rose up to the ceiling, a steel sentinel, unmovable. Across the ceiling snaked a network of ducting and pipes that created even more eerie shadows.

‘Bugger,’ said Dann, staring up at the barrier.

‘Indeed,’ commented Nimrod, striding across to a panel set into a wall at the right of the door. The same undulating indentations covered its surface like they had found on the ‘flight deck’. ‘However, where there’s a door, it stands to reason that there must be a way in.’ Nervously, Aristedes sidled up beside Nimrod, watching as his gloved hand traced the edge of the panel.

Sir, can I make an observation?’

‘Of course.’

‘I was just wondering,’ Aristedes began, desperately trying to keep the trepidation from her voice. ‘Just because a door is there, is it necessarily a good idea to open it?’

‘Your point being?’ Nimrod asked, continuing to work. In the background, Dann looked around nervously, his rifle covering the entrance they had just stepped through.

Aristedes swallowed. ‘Well, it just occurs to me...’

‘... that these somewhat imposing doors may be designed to keep something in...’

‘... rather than keeping us out, yes.’ Aristedes hated it when Nimrod finished other people’s sentences. He merely grunted and with a single yank pulled the panel clear from the wall in a shower of sparks. He fished a small, silver wand-like device from his pocket and

began poking around in the complex snake-pit of wires and cables beneath.

‘And I suppose,’ he growled as he worked, ‘that you think that I hadn’t considered that, with all my years of field experience?’

Aristedes glanced at Dann before replying. ‘Of course not, I...’

‘Good,’ Nimrod said with finality as more sparks, incandescent in the dank lighting, played over his hands. ‘Because I had considered every possible option within seconds of entering this area.’ The device he was using whined like an angry swarm of bees. ‘I am quite aware that leaving these doors in their current state would be the safest course of action...’ More sparks lit the tunnel. ‘But safety is not our primary mission goal, would you not agree, Corporal?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Aristedes wearily.

There was a click and a flash of energy from inside the exposed panel, and Nimrod pulled his hands away. With a hydraulic hiss that sounded like a dozen steam locomotives, the door screamed open, releasing a warm wave of stale air that washed over each of them.

‘Well done, sir,’ gushed Dann, stepping back as he looked up at the opening doors.

Nimrod clicked his tool shut before putting it back within the folds of his coat with a flourish.

‘Your congratulations may be premature. Private,’ he said, raising a non-existent eyebrow, as one by one lights flared into life along the length of the corridor beyond the doorway. ‘I did nothing. Somebody else opened these doors. And, Corporal, before you say anything, I am fully aware that this is probably a trap.’

Nimrod stepped up and stared intently up at the frame of the doorway.

‘Come on.’ He strode on into the corridor.

Giving each other a look, Aristedes and Dann raised their rifles and moved slowly into the corridor after him.

Ashes to Ashes, Dusk to Dusk

‘Schofield!’ Frith yelled, the butt of his rifle smashing into the face of the ghoul who had stumbled up behind him. ‘Cassie! Can you hear me?’

The stupid girl was just standing there, immobile, staring ahead in shock as all around her the creatures advanced, arms outstretched and ready to claw at her. Across the tundra, his men fired in short bursts and zombies kept falling, but the more they dropped, the more came. The air was alive with the tang of cordite.

Swearing under his breath, Frith pulled his SA80 up to his shoulder and squeezed off two rounds, felling two of the freaks that were just metres from the still unmoving Cassie. She didn’t even flinch. He’d seen this happen to soldiers before, freezing in the heat of battle. He’d been right, she just wasn’t ready for this, whatever Nimrod and Crichton said. She might be a vampire, but she was still just a young girl. Scared, frightened. And about to get them all killed.

Downing another of the filthy creatures, he leapt over the stub of metal he was using as cover and began to spring towards Cassie’s position. He was ready to grab her and pull her to relative safety when he felt a sudden and numbing stab of pain run through his shoulder. The heads-up display projected by the visor of his BAN helpfully flashed that the suit had been compromised, before he pitched over to see one of creatures looming over him, a rock held high over his head, ready to smash down on the sergeant once more.

Through the searing pain running from his shoulder. Frith tried to bring his rifle to bear, but all feeling and energy had drained from his arm. The creature grunted once before slamming its arms downwards, then everything went black.

The back of Cassie’s legs hit the table and she stumbled, throwing out an arm to steady herself. The photo of Reggie standing beside Harry Starks

smashed as it hit the floor, spider-webbed cracks spreading across the smiling, shark-like faces.

'Look what you've done, you silly little girl.' The gangster tutted, shaking his head. 'Now I'm going to have to give you a smack.'

A massive arm swept out to grab her but she darted beneath it, stumbling on the carpet and landing in a heap on the floor of the office. No, this wasn't right. It couldn't be. This was Reggie's office in the Dusk, and she shouldn't be here. This was all in the past. She couldn't remember where'd she been a second ago, but she had a memory of biting cold and a creature with dead eyes.

She looked at Reggie. 'This isn't happening,' she screamed. 'You're...'

'Dead?' A bunch of stubby fingers grabbed her by the hair and yanked her back. Pain erupting across her scalp. 'Is that what you were going to say? You know better than that. Cassie. I've been dead for a very long time.'

With barely a grunt, Reggie flipped her over onto the desk, smashing her down. He moved into Cassie's field of vision, leering over her with a lecherous grin. His breath came in warm, foul waves over her face.

'Been thinking about me?' he crowed, pressing himself against her.

She had been thinking about him, hadn't she, but for different reasons. This room only existed in the nightmares that plagued her every night. As the gangster's hands closed round her throat, she suddenly came to her senses.

The Dusk had been destroyed, she'd been there. And Reggie? The memory of a cold, metal bolt in her hand and the resistance of flesh against the sharp point as she'd plunged it into his chest brought her back to reality. She'd seen his flesh bloat and smoke, her nostrils had flared at the stench of charred meat, and she'd watched as his entire filthy body had expanded and exploded, splattering his bloody entrails across the walls.

Reggie Mead was dead.

Cassie brought both hands up and slammed her palms against Reggie's ears. He roared in pain and rage, but his grip loosened. She lifted her legs and pushed against his barrel chest, kicking hard. Reggie flew back through the air, crashing into the far wall. It splintered like stage scenery, allowing the glare of the arctic sun to come streaming into the room, lighting up the dingy casino office.

CASSIE TURNED INSTINCTIVELY AWAY, shielding herself from the

scorching rays of the sun, but she found herself standing on the icy tundra of Lapland, encased within the protection of her BAN suit. Around her, Forge soldiers continued the running battle against the onslaught of attack by the altered locals.

Reggie was once again a forgotten shadow. Where he'd fallen, a ghoul twitched and flailed, desperately trying to get to its feet despite the fact that Cassie had obviously just broken his back.

But what the hell had just happened? Her mind had taken her to the past. It was that thing again, making contact, filing through her memories, trying to find something to use against her. She'd promised herself she would never let anyone mess with her again. Whoever or whatever was delving into her memories had just made a new enemy.

AS FRITH CAME TO, it felt like every nerve in his body was on fire. As consciousness seeped back into his mind, the pain coalesced into a throbbing stabbing centred around his shoulder, his arm limp and useless across his chest. He thought he was a goner, but as he opened his eyes he saw that the visor of his BAN suit's helmet was fractured and cracked. The helmet must have taken the impact of the rock smashing down on it, and, not for the first time, he thanked God for Forge technology.

Ignoring the headache that was pounding at his skull, he squinted through the cracks in his visor. He could hear the sounds of gunfire still raging around him, and standing not too far off was the silhouette of one of the creatures. When Frith passed out, it must have lost interest and lumbered off to see what else it could grunt at.

Slowly, Frith began to drag himself backwards, trying not to draw attention, the desire to get under cover pushing him on. His luck didn't hold - the creature turned and stared for a second at the receding form of the sergeant, before realisation flashed across its eyes, its toy wasn't as broken as it had thought, and it began shambling towards him.

'Bollocks.' Frith tried to increase his speed, but realised it was pointless. The creature would be on him in seconds. His rifle had been dragged along with him, its strap still snaking round his shoulder. He had to twist to pull it round, and pain erupted across his back. With a scream, he pulled the weapon round in front of him and, head swimming, clumsy fingers scrabbled to try to cock it. The creature

came across the sun, blocking out the light, and Frith looked up into its bloated face, which he could now see clearly. Black lips curled back into a leering parody of a grin, revealing dirty, yellowing teeth. As the creature rose up, Frith threw the useless rifle to one side and raised his one good arm, ready to fend off the rain of pummelling blows.

They never came.

The creature's chest erupted in a spray of blood as a jagged point of black metal burst through its chest with a sickening crack of bones. The zombie screamed in pain as the serrated hunk of metal twisted around. Life drained from the eyes of the thing and it fell to the ground in almost comedic slow motion. Its legs buckled beneath it, revealing the very welcome form of Cassie standing behind it.

'You took your bloody time,' Frith managed to spit as he felt the world start to spin around him again.

'Stop complaining, or I'll throw you back,' said Cassie as she knelt down beside him, checking him for breaks. 'I think your arm's broken.'

'Tell me something I don't know,' he grunted through gritted teeth. He gasped as Cassie started to haul him to his feet, and he had to rest his weight against her strong but slight frame.

'You need to go on diet,' said Cassie trying to make light of the situation. 'Sir,' she added respectfully as Frith glared at her. Together they began stumbling for cover in the shadow of the spacecraft as the Forge continued its losing battle.

'I WAS RIGHT,' Crumpton cried out into the empty flight deck.

'Please clarify statement, Doctor,' said Oracle, the computer's voice crackling over the remote unit that sat atop the control stack.

Crumpton let her eyes fall over the data streaming across the small screen, trying to make sense of the fragments of information that Oracle's translation protocol had managed to crack. It was slow work, but a pattern was forming within the secrets of the alien language, a pattern that supported her initial theories.

'The ship *does* appear to have an automated defence system. The radiation we've been picking up that led us to the ship has been used to mutate the local populace. If I'm reading this right, the ship uses this system to provide a willing workforce, providing them with the

knowledge to effect the necessary repairs and provide protection.'

'A doubtful conclusion, Doctor. To control this number of human minds and mutate DNA would take –'

'A massive power source and technology beyond current human understanding.'

'Confirmed.'

'I don't think this vessel is run on an ordinary double-A battery. And technology beyond current human understanding is exactly why we're out here. The sophistication of this vessel and the automated computer systems indicate that it originates from an incredibly advanced civilisation.' Crumpton stopped and looked up for a second, her mind flashing on the absurdity of how Forge personnel filled their working days. 'What am I saying?'

'Dr Crumpton, my programming does not allow me to ignore the boundaries of scientific law.'

'That's your problem,' sniffed Crumpton. 'I'm in the business of theorising. You can just carry on with the translation.'

'Confirmed.' Oracle fell silent, and Crumpton couldn't help feeling that she'd just offended a machine.

Head spinning with excitement, Crumpton brought her arm up to open a channel to Nimrod, when she heard a scrape of metal across the floor. A chill ran down her spine as she stood very still, swallowing hard.

She wasn't alone.

A Crack in the Glass

Aristedes let out a whistle of amazement as the trio entered a massive chamber which formed a sudden contrast to the cramped, dark confines of the rest of the ship. A wall of thick opaque glass stretching up twenty feet in the air dominated the facing wall. She craned her neck to take in the heavy metallic slab at the very centre that sealed it tight, pressed down by heavy-set pillars that stretched from the ceiling to the lid of the cube of glass.

‘I wouldn’t want to see the goldfish that was kept in that.’

‘Goldfish?’ enquired Nimrod.

Whatever was in that thing had no chance of getting out.

‘It’s a tank, isn’t it?’ answered Aristedes, gesturing with her gun.

Nimrod strode up to the glass and rapped on it with his knuckles. The dull sound echoed ominously off the walls. Dann looked around nervously, stepping slowly round the room, his rifle trained at various points around the wall and high-vaulted ceiling. He focused on a point at the top of the glass wall.

‘Fascinating,’ breathed Nimrod, lost in his own thoughts. ‘It must be five feet thick.’ He turned to face Aristedes. ‘And it’s completely empty.’

‘Corporal!’ Dann called over from where his progress had taken him at the far side of the room. The tone of his voice didn’t fill Aristedes with confidence as she walked over to join him, Nimrod getting there a few seconds ahead of her.

The pair were looking up at the farthest corner of the plate of glass. ‘It must have happened in the crash.’

‘A logical assumption, Private.’

‘And not a good one.’

‘Again, I’m forced to agree.’

An ugly fracture snaked down from the top of the glass plate to the seal of thick metal at its middle. The rift in the glass revealed that

there was indeed nothing inside, and viscous liquid glistened on the sharp edges that bulged out at odd angles. Beneath their feet, great clumps of the crystallised material glinted in the torch light, scattered all over the floor.

‘Something got out,’ assessed Aristedes flatly. ‘Whatever was inside used the damage as an opportunity to do a moonlight flit.’

Suddenly animated, Dann turned to face his corporal.

‘Aren’t we being a bit alarmist? This could just be the water supply tank. How do we know that this wasn’t just filled with water and the water pressure fractured the tank on impact and just drained away.’

Nimrod folded his arms. ‘A reasonable theory. Private, that forgets one important factor. The ship is completely automated, no crew. Who would need the water?’

‘But -’ started Dann.

‘Secondly,’ continued Nimrod, ‘to use the corporal’s analogy, why have a fish tank and not keep fish?’ He bent down to recover a fragment of shattered glass and sized it up in his palm. He tossed it in the air, judging its weight. ‘Thirdly, the corridors of the ship appear to lead here, to this chamber. Why make a tank such an integral part of your design?’

Dann dropped his rifle to his side, utterly deflated.

‘Fourthly, what would you secure in a tank of this nature? When we’ve established that, a final point occurs: if it’s not here now -’ Nimrod’s voice reduced to an ominous whisper ‘- *where* is it?’

CRUMPTON MOVED SLOWLY around the metal stack, hand snaking out towards where she had abandoned her gun belt. The dull metal of the gun’s butt reflected the light cast by the holographic display from Oracle’s remote unit.

‘Oracle,’ whispered Crumpton as she moved closer to the weapon, ‘scan the room for life signs.’

‘Complying, Dr Crumpton.’

‘For God’s sake, do it quietly!’ she hissed.

The Oracle unit whirred and clicked as it worked. With a deep breath, Crumpton lunged for her gun and pulled it from the holster, cocking it and bringing it to bear in one fluid movement. She hated the damn things, but she was grateful to Frith for insisting on training sessions down on the firing range.

A sudden flash of movement in one dark corner of the chamber brought Crumpton whipping around as something skittered away, out of sight. Her finger squeezed tighter on the trigger, her breathing quickening.

‘Life signs negative,’ purred Oracle.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Crumpton through clenched teeth, moving so that her back was to the cold metal of the wall.

‘Scan function operating at one hundred per cent efficiency.’

‘There’s no such thing as one hundred per cent efficient. Scan again!’

Oracle didn’t bother to reply, the humming from the unit taking on a decidedly affronted air. Crumpton waited, her knuckles whitening around the grip of the gun.

The scientist screamed as the doors directly opposite suddenly clanked open, hissing balefully in the darkness. Without thinking, she loosed off two shots into the darkness beyond, the report ringing in her ears as it bounced from wall to wall. Eventually it subsided, leaving silence, and Crumpton shaking and wide eyed with her weapon still trained on the door.

What the hell was happening’

She stood like that for what must have been several minutes. Nothing moved in the room, and the doors eventually slid back into place with a satisfyingly metallic thud. Slowly, Crumpton lowered the gun and brought her breathing under control. Get a grip, you stupid woman, she chided herself. There was nothing in here, it was just her overactive imagination.

Calmer, she moved back towards the stack where the remote Oracle unit hummed away to itself. She placed the gun carefully atop the squat metal box. She was getting too old for this job, that...

A sudden warning trill from Oracle had her hand going straight for the gun.

‘Alert, Life signs detected.’

Crumpton looked around frantically and brought the gun up. A confusion of movement overloaded her senses as something moved quickly to her left. A mass of flesh reared up in the darkness and a muscled arm whipped out, knocking the gun from her hand, sending it skittering across the room. Hot, fetid breath blasted across her face and she heard a guttural moan.

‘Oracle! Send out general...’

Her voice was cut off to a strangled gasp as vice-like hands clamped around her neck.

ONE SECOND HE WAS THERE, the next he wasn’t.

If either Aristedes or Nimrod had been looking in Private Dann’s direction, they would have seen the young soldier stop and look down fascinated at the single drop of dark liquid that had splashed onto the toe of his boot. They would have looked on, confused, as he crouched down to wipe it away and give it a curious sniff from his gloved fingers. They would have seen him flinching as another drop splashed down from a recess of pipes in the ceiling on to his goggles.

They could have warned him as he stood and looked up, arching his back to get a better view as the soft rain of blood-like liquid began patting across his chest from the ceiling, quickly becoming a thick, gloopy substance that began pouring through the narrow hole above. They would have been shocked into action by his shriek of fear as the flow of liquid solidified into a thick crimson tendril that snaked down, taking on a life of its own. They might have been able to help, to stop the tentacle reaching for the trooper, who squeezed off a round from his weapon in panic as it snaked round his torso.

But no one had been looking in his direction.

Dann’s gun clattered to the floor as his twitching, convulsing body was yanked up into the air. Aristedes immediately swung up her rifle and took aim. Blood was vomiting from his mouth as a shimmering red tentacle tightened round him, impossibly piercing his chest. Aristedes sent a stream of bullets, only for them to clang uselessly in a barrage of sparks into the far wall, the tendril untouched.

Dann disappeared into the shadows, his cries cutting off abruptly at the sound of flesh being ripped asunder.

‘Christ!’ screamed Aristedes, aiming up uselessly into the ceiling. ‘What the hell is that?’

Nimrod didn’t reply. He watched in fascination as Dann’s body, free of the bloodied tentacle, plummeted back to earth, slapping noisily against the floor, followed by a wet hail of his vital organs.

Neither Nimrod nor Aristedes could take their eyes off the desiccated corpse.

CRUMPTON FELL TO THE FLOOR. The scientist grabbed at the strong hands that threatened to throttle the life out of her, but the zombified villager continued to apply pressure. Lank hair hung down and the eyes that looked at her were kind and benign, the mind behind them having no comprehension of what it was doing.

‘Interface uplink eighty per cent complete,’ announced Oracle into the middle of this madness. ‘Request status report, Dr Crumpton.’

Crumpton gasped out in terror as the edges of her vision began to haze over with red. She’d give that stupid computer a status report if she could...

With a supreme summoning of strength, Crumpton heaved upwards and she felt the pressure reduce around her windpipe and she managed to throw the creature to the side. It yelped out in pain as the back of its head struck the corner of the computer stack with a metallic crunch.

Head swimming, Crumpton struggled to her feet and threw herself bodily over the computer stack towards where she thought her gun had landed. Not slowed down by a blow to the head, the drone was instantly up and lunging, and Crumpton felt herself being pulled back as it grabbed her ankle in its relentless grip. She span round to face the monster as she began to slide off the stack and brought her heel up as fast as she could into its nose.

However strong this thing now was, its flesh and bone were still no match for a tough army boot in the face. With a fresh howl of pain, the drone went down, clutching at his face as blood spurted through fingers.

Free once more, Crumpton threw herself over the other side of the stack, slithering into the gap between it and the wall where she saw her gun lying temptingly a few feet away.

‘Interface uplink ninety per cent complete.’

Crumpton’s heart throbbed against her chest as she heard the lumbering gait of the creature shambling round the side of the stack, its shadow crossing the spotlight of her torch as it shone against the wall. There wasn’t much room to move in the enclosed space, but her fingers curled around the butt of the gun and she twisted round painfully as the silhouette of the drone loomed above her. Without

hesitating, Crumpton brought the gun up and fired instinctively.

There was no scream as blood and bone blossomed from the back of the creature's skull, raining against the wall as the thing toppled forward silently. Crumpton brought her arms up and gasped as the drone landed painfully on top of her, its sightless Neanderthal eyes staring straight at her, blood oozing down the clean hole in its forehead.

With a final shriek of disgust, Crumpton pushed the creature off and sprung to her feet. Cursing, she wiped the blood from her eyes and, not letting go of the pistol, keyed a series of commands into her BAN interface. Even though she knew it was coming, she couldn't help but wince as her suit administered a tiny, but potent, injection of antibodies into her system. She had no way of knowing if the creature's blood contained infection and she didn't want to find out the hard way. The standard blend of Forge anti-toxins could cope with it - if and when she managed to get back to the Alpha Facility to make a more detailed examination.

As she turned to return to her work, fingers closed around her ankle. The creature moaned at her feet, attempting to pull her off balance. Inwardly she chastised herself, remembering Frith's first contact with one of the infected. A bullet to the brain wasn't enough.

Second time lucky, then, Edith. Second time lucky.

The round ripped a hole into its chest and finally, with a wail, the bloody thing lay still. Breathing heavily, Crumpton let herself slide exhausted to the floor. The next time Frith insisted she take part in field-training exercises back at the Forge, she wouldn't complain.

With a self-congratulatory ping, Oracle announced, 'Uplink complete. Interface now online. Status report, Dr Crumpton.'

Around the room, lights came up one by one with a hum of power, and the screen that had almost activated before came to life, its surface packed with data and indecipherable symbols.

Staggering woozily to her feet, Crumpton thought it best not to give the computer the pleasure of a response just yet. After all, she doubted whether Oracle would know how to stick a status report where the sun didn't shine.

'THOUGHT I'd lost you back there,' Frith said through gritted teeth as Cassie plunged a needle into his neck.

‘The feeling was mutual,’ she replied, pulling the syringe clear and tossing it aside. ‘There, that should keep you clear of infection until we can get you out of here.’

‘Since when did you come over all Florence Nightingale?’ Frith asked, testing the makeshift sling she had slung around his arm. The shock of the attack had started to clear now and the painkillers were running through his system. He tried to get to his feet. ‘I’d better get back to the...’

‘Not in your condition,’ said Cassie sharply, pushing him back down. ‘You can’t even hold a rifle. You’d be a liability.’

‘And you’re going to try to stop me are you?’

‘You can bet on it.’

‘I never knew you cared.’

‘I don’t.’

Frith snorted as he began to haul himself back up to his feet, instinctively Cassie threw out an arm to steady him. You had to hand it to Frith, he was tough.

Swaying but staying on his feet, Frith managed to pull out a side arm, and painfully managed to cock it with some difficulty. ‘If I can fire this, I can still fight. Let’s go.’

But Cassie wasn’t listening.

Her nostrils flared, zoning in on a sudden sweet, familiar scent that sent shivers shooting up and down her spine, exploding at the base of her brain, in an instant, she felt her being surrendering to an inexcusable desire, tightening her stomach, in the entire world, there was only one odour that would generate such a violent, reaction in one of her kind: the flowing, seeping, thirst-quenching plasma that brought water to her mouth and beads of perspiration to her palms at the merest thought. But where was it coming from? There was enough gore on the battlefield, that much was certain, but the wave of pleasure that swept through her deepest being could only have originated from blood fresher than any she had ever tasted and free from the pollutants of modern life. Head spinning, Cassie turned this way and that, trying to pinpoint the location of the aroma, but could sense nothing more than the familiar tang of the Forge troops and the miasma of the ghouls.

But there was something else. Something near.

Her eyes flickered down to the pure, white snow at her feet. She

looked down curiously as a single scarlet drop appeared, seeping up through the solid ground. Cassie watched as more dots of stark colour formed a puddle, bubbling up and expanding quickly. The dark stain spread away from her, radiating out towards the soldiers that crouched some twenty feet away, creeping through the snow like a sentient shadow. Cassie wanted to shout out, wanted to warn them, but her throat had clenched and she could only raise a redundant arm as the liquid flowed beneath the nearest soldier's boot.

He never knew what hit him. A crimson fountain erupted from beneath him, dragging him high into the air, his own screams drowned by the indescribable alien screech that burst from the centre of the solidifying column of liquid. All faces, ghoul and trooper alike, gaped at the sight, flinching as the body of the stricken soldier slapped hard and fast upon the ice.

With just one look, Cassie knew that the steaming corpse had been utterly drained of blood, but that was the least of their worries. Frantically, Cassie's BAN suit processors threw countless examples of alien life against her heads-up display, but couldn't find a match to the creature towering above her. The display went offline when it had exhausted all possibilities. And still the impossibility reared up, the thick, red liquid thrashing angrily in a tornado of tentacles.

Next to her. Frith was staring up in equal awe, but the beeping of his communicator broke the spell and, never taking his eyes off the blood creature, he answered the call with a steely tone.

'Frith.'

'What the hell's going on up there, Frith?' snarled Nimrod. 'Your team's life signs have started disappearing at a rate of knots.'

'We've got a bit of a problem,' replied Frith weakly.

'I have no time for your problems. Frith. We have a hostile life form at large. Location unknown.'

Cassie looked on as a squirming tentacle pierced the chest of a nearby trooper and carried him screaming into the air.

Frith spoke flatly into his comlink. 'I think we just found it, sir.'

Nyathoggoth

Nimrod halted his advance down the corridor, causing Aristedes to do the same. Nervously, the corporal kept her gun trained back down the corridor.

‘Say again, Frith?’ barked Nimrod into his comlink.

‘I said,’ Frith crackled back, ‘I think we just found it! There’s a bloody great monster just erupted out of the snow. You ought to see this thing!’ The speaker crackled for a second, before Nimrod heard Frith yell, ‘Open fire!’

‘Thank you for your succinct description, Frith. We’ve already seen it. We lost Private Dann to it.’

‘Bollocks. Are you determined to wipe out every last one of my men on this mission?’

‘Hardly, Sergeant.’ Nimrod began moving again, the tails of his coat billowing out like a black bird of prey. Aristedes ran to keep up as they moved swiftly through the corridors. ‘Frith, I want you to contain that creature for as long as possible. We need time to work on the computer and find out what it is.’

‘And how to kill it, I hope,’ the sergeant yelled over background gunfire.

‘That’s not why we’re here, Frith. Contain it and wait for further instructions.’

‘Sod you, Nimrod! I’m calling in the choppers for immediate evac! If your bleached white arse isn’t up here in five minutes, we’re leaving you...’

‘That is an order, Frith, or I will relieve you of command and place Cassie in charge. Nimrod out.’

Nimrod silenced the comlink. Aristedes gave him a sideways glance as they picked up the pace even more, boots thudding and echoing around the walkway. ‘Something to say, Corporal?’ asked Nimrod.

‘Urn, no, sir.’ Aristedes shook her head.

‘Good.’

As they moved, a gentle hum filled the corridor - lights sparked into existence from the ceiling, illuminating their progress. Nimrod looked round and Aristedes could swear he was almost smiling. ‘It seems Dr Crumpton has made progress.’

‘FRITH TO NIMROD!’ Frith snarled into his comlink. ‘Come in!’ Static hissed in his ear and angrily he ripped the earpiece out. One of these days... But he couldn’t think about that now. People were dying and his arm was hurting like buggery.

He looked around, taking in the situation. Towering above the snow as a throbbing, heaving mass of viscous, blood-red tentacles stood the creature. The surface of its limbs rippled like a broiling lake. The tentacles flailed around, slicing through the air with a whiplash hiss. He saw a dark flash of a Forge soldier - Private Curbishley, was it? - highlighted against the stark white of the tundra as he ran frantically across the plane, loosing off a volley of shots and gaping up at the hellish creature.

A flash of red swooped down on the soldier and all Frith could do was watch as a bloody tentacle wrapped around his torso and hoisted the poor lad into the air, only for him to be dropped to the ground seconds later as a lifeless sack.

Frith looked around frantically. He tried to cock his gun. to join in the fight with his one good arm, but he was next to useless. ‘Shit,’ he hissed under his breath. They were going to be cut to ribbons. ‘Fall back!’ he shouted into the air. ‘Fall back!’

‘Fall back to where?’ Cassie shouted across to him. In the receding light, she ripped her BAN helmet off and her eyes gleamed with the buzz of combat.

‘Anywhere! We’re dead if we stay out here.’

‘Not necessarily - look!’ Cassie pointed with a gloved hand towards the creature, just as a grenade blast impacted against the side of its thick, trunked body. The grenade had no effect, but amidst the gathering smoke and running black splashes of Forge soldiers, Frith saw a change in the movements of the zombified villagers.

As one, they were turning away from their assault on his men and focusing their attention on the creature.

‘They’re attacking it?’ He ran a hand through his sweat-soaked hair, incredulous.

‘They don’t have a choice, they’re protecting the ship.’

Frith looked at Cassie as if she were mad, but didn’t question it. ‘They don’t stand a chance.’

‘But it might give us a breathing space,’ she said. Forge soldiers were taking this opportunity to make a break for Frith and Cassie’s position, running at full pelt into the cover.

Tentacles flew everywhere, plucking drones from the ground and discarding the drained carcasses in quick succession. Power rippled across the limbs like flexing muscles and Frith looked up with wide, suddenly understanding eyes. ‘Jesus, it’s getting bigger!’

As each drone was absorbed, the creature was indeed growing in size, each drained zombie adding to its increasing size.

‘This is not good.’ Frith turned to Cassie, who didn’t reply. ‘Did you hear me? I said...’ He stopped, realising that Cassie wasn’t listening.

Her eyes had glazed over and she was staring straight ahead, mouth hanging open, barely breathing.

Frith sighed. ‘Fine time to go over the bloody rainbow again.’

THE DOORS to the flight deck whined open as Nimrod burst in.

‘Dr Crumpton, your report, and make it quick. We have a xeno-threat situation.’

‘Now there’s a novelty,’ Crumpton replied, not even glancing from the screen. ‘Let me guess, you discovered an empty tank and now an angry tidal wave of sentient liquid is sloshing around the place.’ Nimrod joined her by the screen that continued to scroll with a gibberish of alien runes. Behind them, Aristedes automatically took up position at the door, weapon raised and ready.

‘I see you’ve made progress,’ observed Nimrod, looking over the screen.

‘You could say that. With a little help from Oracle, of course.’ Aristedes looked down at the corpse of the drone. ‘Looks like you had a visitor,’ she said, kicking it with the toe of her boot to make sure it was dead.

Crumpton glanced over. ‘We didn’t quite see eye to eye.’

‘What have you discovered, Doctor?’

‘It seems that you were right. The ship is fully automated, no crew.

And for a very worrying reason.'

'Being?'

'This isn't just any old piece of xenotech that's crash-landed on Earth. It's a maximum-security prison.'

'If it's a prison, where are the prisoners?'

'Prisoner.' Crumpton said with emphasis. 'Singular.'

'Ah,' grunted Nimrod. 'We've met.'

'But why all this just to hold one creature?' asked Aristedes.

'We've seen what it's capable of first hand, Corporal.'

'Private Dann?' Crumpton asked, sadness etching her face.

'I'm afraid so, Doctor.'

Crumpton indicated the computer stack. 'All the files are here. This creature is evil, Nimrod. Imagine a being that was unstoppable, willing and able to slaughter every living thing in its path. A being so powerful that even the slightest contact with another living creature could cause unimaginable pain and suffering. What would you do with it?'

'Easy,' called Aristedes. 'Lock it in the deepest, darkest cell and throw away the key.'

'Exactly. Or remove it from your world altogether.' Crumpton threw her arms wide to take in the room. 'Welcome to the latest in state-of-the-art, maximum-security solitary confinement.'

EVEN AS SHE screamed for Frith, Cassie knew that the sergeant couldn't help her now. He wasn't with her. He was on Earth, on the other side of the galaxy, fighting zombies on a sheet of ice. As the pain erupted behind her eyes, she struggled to remember how she came to be kneeling here in this place, feeling coarse, purple sand beneath her knees, the warmth of the twin suns burning into her neck. She couldn't remember why the throng of people around her was screaming. She couldn't remember why they were running, calling to her.

She couldn't remember anything at all.

But there was a word. It was dark and seductive, but it brought something else with it. Cold, unadulterated, tribal fear, choking her from within, numbing even the pain that made her head feel like it was about to explode.

She could remember a name.

She could remember... Nyathoggoth.

‘NYATHOGGOTH?’ Nimrod rolled the alien word around his tongue. ‘Fascinating.’

‘Quite a mouthful, isn’t it,’ continued Crumpton. She manipulated a control on the remote Oracle unit, and the screen flared with more data. ‘According to these records, that thing up there was responsible for the eradication of life on more than twenty worlds.’

The screen showed a star chart, a galaxy they had no hope of recognising. One by one, the circles representing planets flashed and went dark in sequence.

There was silence as the enormity of what they were dealing with sank in. Twenty worlds? Billions upon billions of lives. Entire countries, continents, all blighted by a onslaught of destruction, mass murder on an unimaginable scale.

Crumpton broke the silence. ‘They tried putting this creature above the gods, and it turned on them.’

Nimrod rubbed his cruel lips with a gloved finger, not looking her in the eye. Was the mighty Nimrod finally out of his depth?

‘How did it do it? How did it kill so many people?’ he asked finally.

‘Oh, you’ll like this, Nimrod. The Nyathoggoth drank the blood of entire worlds.’

THE ROAR FILLED her head as she finally forced herself to look up from the sand. The shadow was speeding across the landscape towards her, blocking out the light of the suns.

Nyathoggoth.

It was like a wall of crimson, rushing, crashing and flattening all in its path. She’d heard her elders whispering the name in huddles, pushing her away when she asked what it meant. But she knew. She may have been young but she wasn’t stupid. She’d heard the stories. Everyone had. The other planets in the system were gone. No one had known where it had come from. It had appeared on one of the rim worlds, contaminating the water, staining it red. Then it had risen from the water, like something alive, snatching up victims like dolls, ripping them apart and draining their life into itself, growing more powerful with every victim until it flooded entire cities with its

heaving bulk.

Nobody knew how it traversed from world to world, but they knew when it arrived because the screaming started and didn't stop until the death of the last.

Cassie stared up at the boiling wall of red that raced towards her through the alien eyes she now thought of as her own and raised her arms in the air in surrender. There was no point in fighting the onslaught. She was an insignificant speck of dust in a tornado.

She felt her body rip apart as the wave slammed into her. bones fracturing, blood vessels rupturing, the skin flayed from her liquefying muscle like tissue paper. There was no pain and, as the life drained from her body, she felt herself rushing forward, joining with all who had fallen under the shadow before her.

She was unstoppable, she was mighty, she was Nyathoggoth.

CRUMPTON READ from the translations running across Oracle's screen. 'Alliances were formed, treaties signed, whole galaxies uniting to destroy this thing.'

Nimrod had turned his back on her and was pacing back and forth as he listened, his expression becoming grimmer. Were they fighting a battle that couldn't be won?

'But they couldn't destroy it. The creature was finally weakened and cornered on a backwater world. The creature proved indestructible, but containable. The surviving populations in the system were baying for its blood, calling for justice. However, the only question was, how the hell could you lop off its head?'

THE FACES PRESSED in on her, warping at the edge of her vision to become shrinking walls of solid hate. She cried out in anger and frustration, throwing her massive bulk against the restraints. They continued to ensnare her from all angles. She could do nothing. No matter how hard she thrashed, no matter how she searched for a crack in the cold barriers that her enemies erected around her.

They built fortifications around her, the walls blocking out the light, encasing her in darkness. She grew weaker and weaker, anger slipping away. The mighty destroyer reduced to a small blob of hate, cocooned in a metal box, away from the sweet blood of life. They stared at her through the walls in morbid fascination, their triumphant

faces scarred by the pain and suffering she had brought to their worlds. The shadow of fear would always be with them.

And she had eternity on her side. They could weaken her, they could hold her. But they would never truly destroy her.

She was Nyathoggoth.

She was unstoppable.

‘The Nyathoggoth was too dangerous to be kept alive, and the alliance developed a plan. To launch the creature into the wastes of space aboard a fully automated space vessel, the creature contained in a dormant state at its heart.’

‘This vessel,’ Nimrod added unnecessarily.

‘A course was set and the creature was blasted out into the heavens. The alliance breathed a sigh of relief as their living bogeyman disappeared into history.’

‘Hardly seems a responsible plan’ said Aristedes. ‘It’s a bit like brushing the dust under the carpet. Pack this Nyath-whatsit off and hope somebody else will deal with it for you. And that somebody seems to be us.’

‘I somehow feel there was more to it than that.’ Nimrod strode back the computer stack. ‘There must have been a final destination. But something went wrong.’

SHE FELT the vibration of the ship rippling through her. She didn’t know how long she had been trapped here in the dark but she felt the relief and celebrations of entire worlds as she flashed by them, powering across star systems.

Nyathoggoth was gone.

And now she knew what her fate was. She had seen what lay ahead. She had seen the face of oblivion.

And now she was afraid.

‘YOU’VE GOT to be joking?’

‘I assure you, I’m not,’ said Crumpton.

‘They were going to drop the ship into the heart of a black hole?’ Aristedes shook her head in disbelief. ‘I’m sorry, but that’s just mad.’

‘On the contrary.’ Nimrod cut in, finally looking up to meet their eyes. ‘A black hole. The only phenomenon in the heavens with the power to rip Nyathoggoth apart. The ultimate deathblow. It’s an

extreme solution, but inventive,' he droned with admiration.

'But it never got there,' said Crumpton.

'Do we know what happened?' asked Nimrod.

'The automated logs are scrambled,' Crumpton admitted. 'Oracle can't make head nor tail of them. A malfunction in the systems, perhaps. Some phenomenon that threw the ship off course before it got to the black hole.'

'It could have been drifting for centuries,' mused Nimrod quietly.

'That thought had crossed my mind.'

'Look,' Aristedes said. 'We've seen this thing. It's...' She struggled for the right word. '... hideous, but it doesn't look like it was the kind of creature that can eat entire planets for breakfast. Are you sure we're not missing something in the translation?'

Crumpton fixed her with a stare and held her eyes for a second before turning back to the pad. 'I'm not sure about the translation; she said softly, 'but we did find some images of what i can only assume we're up against, footage that I believe shows Nyathoggoth at the height of its powers. Probably left in the records as a warning to anybody who was unlucky enough to find them.' She toggled a button on the Oracle unit and the screen began to glow again. 'Watch this and then tell me if you think if we've made a mistake.'

HER SONG of triumph echoed around the chamber as she felt the ship pitch. Something had roused her from her slumber. Her prison was falling, tumbling through space, broken free from the sure, steady line it had followed for so long. The future was uncertain once again and wherever she came to rest she knew that she could begin again and the universe would tremble once more at the sound of Nyathoggoth.

Even now, as she heard the hull buckling and felt the scorching heat of metal stroked by a fiery atmosphere, she could hear them calling her name in terror.

NYATHOGGOTH.

Nyathoggoth.

Nyathoggoth.

CASSIE.

It was like being pulled to the surface, the murky world she had

become accustomed to disappearing from around her as she gasped for air. She could feel his hand on her shoulder, shaking her, and heard the sound of the battle, bullets slicing uselessly through the creature and soggy slap of a corpse falling against the ice. She could hear his voice yelling in her ear, demanding to know what she'd seen, desperate for any help her vision could bring to a fight they were losing, but she couldn't speak. She could only slip to the floor exhausted, only able to push one word from her dry lips.

‘Nyathoggoth.’

AS THE SCREEN FADED, Nimrod stared at the after-image.

Crumpton leant towards him urgently, both hands on the computer stack. ‘Nimrod, we cannot risk harvesting this creature. My considered recommendation is that we cut our losses and sterilise the area. The danger this creature poses to this planet...’

Several seconds passed in silence as Nimrod continued to stare at the screen, motionless. The only movement was from his bright blue eyes, which darted from side to side. Eventually, he turned to her.

‘For once, Crumpton, I agree.’

Crumpton was about to jump in with her usual protest, until she realised what he'd just said. ‘Oh.’

‘Surprised, Doctor?’

‘Well...’

‘I'm committed to the work of the Forge, Doctor. I'll make sacrifices, endanger lives as far as is necessary to fulfil the remit of our organisation, but not when our actions would deliberately endanger the planet. However, we have a problem. How do you propose we destroy a creature that all our information suggests being indestructible?’

‘There has to be a way,’ insisted Crumpton.

‘An entire civilisation tried and failed.’

Crumpton thought hard. ‘This vessel must have a fail-safe, somewhere. A dead man's switch, like our own Hades protocol back at the Forge.’

Nimrod seized on Crumpton's line of reasoning. ‘Excellent. Doctor.’ He began tapping a sequence into the remote Oracle unit. ‘Even if no such system exists, the ship's power source must be vast.’

‘Meaning?’

‘It should be possible to program the computer to fold the power flow back into the reactor and create an explosive force capable of destroying the creature.’

‘You hope,’ Crumpton pointed out.

‘If we can’t, Crumpton, we’re all dead.’

Connection

An undulating mass of red tentacles sheared through the air, taking with it yet another member of the Forge team, who was launched screaming into the air. Frith ignored the biting pain that was spreading across his shoulder and chest and loosed off a volley of shots towards the creature, whatever good it would do.

Static crackled in his ear, before Nimrod's voice broke through it. 'Frith, report.'

'I wondered where you'd got to. We're getting our arses kicked! How's that for a report?'

'As informative as ever. Dr Crumpton and myself are working on a way of destroying the Nyathoggoth.'

'About time.'

'This could take a while,' crackled Nimrod. 'You need to find a way of slowing the creature down.'

'Well, thanks for the advice, Nimrod.' As Frith spoke into his mic, Cassie ran up, jumping over the desiccated corpse of a drone. 'What do you suggest? Give the damn thing indigestion?'

'Do what it takes, Sergeant. Buy us some time.'

Cassie's head snapped round to stare intently at Frith. 'What did you say?' she asked, grabbing at his injured arm to turn him round towards her. Frith winced in pain.

'What?' he said, shaking her off.

'Indigestion! That's exactly what we need to give it!'

'What are you talking about?' Frith looked at her in confusion, but Cassie wasn't listening. She threw her SL80 to the ground and began running full pelt towards the Nyathoggoth, where it continued to ripple and grow, gaining more power with each passing second.

'Schofield, what the hell are you doing?' Frith shouted after her. 'Get back here now!'

'Frith, what's happening?' Nimrod's voice urgently sounded in his

earpiece.

‘That stupid little bitch has gone mad. She’s heading straight for the creature.’

‘Nimrod to Cassie,’ Frith heard Nimrod say, but Cassie kept going, sprinting across the snow. ‘Stand down, that is an order!’

‘She’s not listening,’ Frith shouted into the comlink. All he could do was watch as Cassie ran full pelt into the belly of the beast.

FOUR UNIFORMED FORGE soldiers sat around a table, smoking cigarettes, one of the men dealing a hand of cards. Next to them sat the array of computer equipment that had formed the forward base’s centre of operations.

All but abandoned by the Forge team, the Sami village was quite now, a ghost town in the approaching night, and the soldiers had found a warm, empty building nestling near to their two Merlin helicopters.

Suddenly, static hissed over the comlink speaker. ‘Aristedes to forward base, please acknowledge.’

One of the soldiers dropped his hand of cards and nearly fell backwards off his chair in his haste to grab the radio handset ‘Forward base responding. Go ahead, Corp.’ Around him, his fellow card players turned their attention away from the game, preparing for orders and action.

‘Private Tebbutt,’ Aristedes’s tinny voice burst from the speaker ‘Alert status delta. Abandon forward base and prepare for immediate take-off and full emergency team extraction.’

The words were barely out of the speaker and the other men were immediately on their feet, running towards the Merlins. ‘Acknowledged, Corporal,’ said Tebbutt.

‘Proceed to crash site and maintain holding pattern. Once in position, stand by and await further orders.’

‘Acknowledged.’

‘Aristedes out!’

The speaker went dead and Private Tebbutt sprung into action and joined the efficient activity of his comrades. ‘Come on. lads, let’s move it!’

‘EVACUATION UNDER WAY,’ Aristedes informed Nimrod and Crumpton

from her position by the door. 'ETA: ten minutes.'

'Thank you, Corporal,' said Crumpton.

Nimrod keyed a sequence across the surface of the Oracle unit. 'Oracle, scan computer for self-destruction systems or reactor controls.'

The unit hummed. 'Please advise nature of query.'

Nimrod's eyes narrowed. 'We are attempting to find a method of destroying the creature.'

'Query invalid. Search parameters discontinued.'

Nimrod and Crumpton exchanged glances. 'Explain,' demanded Crumpton, stepping forward.

'Instructions conflict with core directive.'

'Impossible' growled Nimrod. 'I created your directives.'

'Additional core directives embedded in higher functions systems. Encoded at director level.'

Nimrod's gloved hand curled into a fist as Aristedes walked over, her interest piqued. 'Elaborate,' hissed Nimrod.

'Embedded core directive programming prevents the Oracle system from endangering harvestable xenotech. Your actions have a 72.342 per cent chance of causing irreversible damage to subject. Query denied.'

Nimrod picked up the Oracle unit and quickly keyed a further sequence. Crumpton slumped wearily against the computer stack, head in her hands.

'Oracle,' ordered Nimrod. 'Countermand embedded core directives.'

'Negative. Embedded core directives can only be countermanded at director level.'

With a grunt of anger, Nimrod hurled the Oracle pad against the wall, where it smashed into pieces. Crumpton looked up, alert again. 'We might need that,' she protested.

'We're on our own now. Doctor. We have to find the systems manually.'

Crumpton looked down at the array of indentations scattered across the stack and raised her arms in frustration. 'We have no idea how how these systems work. We'd be basing everything on guesswork. Without manual controls, it could take forever.'

Nimrod raised himself up to his full, imposing height. 'Then it's

time we made our own.'

Nimrod raised both arms high over his head, the folds of his coat hanging heavily, and brought both gloved fists smashing down through the metal of the computer stack in an explosion of sparks.

CASSIE FELT the air rushing by her face as she ran. head down, towards the bubbling mass of the Nyathoggoth looming above her. One of the remaining drones that had been lucky enough to avoid the touch of the creature lumbered towards her, arms outstretched to grab at her. She shoulder-charged the empty being with a grunt of exertion, sending it flying up into the air with a gut-wrenching crunch, thudding to the ground in a mess of broken bones. This was no time to play nice.

Without looking, Cassie thrust a hand down to her belt, pulling out the standard-issue field knife that all Forge soldiers carried, before looking up directly into the body of the creature. She concentrated, pushing her psychic presence away from her body, calling out to it. 'Come and get me!'

The Nyathoggoth stopped for a split second. Was it listening, sniffing her out? A screeching roar radiated from the centre of the creature and it was immediately moving, lashing out a tentacle towards her. Gritting her teeth, Cassie changed direction and sprinted straight for the flailing limb, her muscles pounding. There was a brief moment of calm, and then it hit her, the living liquid smashing into her body, wrapping around, constricting, tightening and lifting her bodily from the ground. Everything was a blur as she was thrown around, being given a nauseous, fairground view of her surroundings.

Cassie had managed to keep her arms free of the living chain that bound her and she thrust the knife towards the wrist of her other arm, ripping through the thick fabric of her BAN suit. Without hesitating she drew the knife over the exposed flesh, slashing into her own flesh. Thick, dark blood welled around the blade and began to flow freely from the widening wound, showering down over the coils of deep scarlet that held her.

As Cassie's blood touched the flesh of the Nyathoggoth, it disappeared, absorbed within the alien's form.

CRUMPTON AND ARISTEDES WATCHED as Nimrod pulled sparking

wires from the innards of the computer stack.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Crumpton.

‘Improvising.’ Nimrod removed his coat and threw it the floor. He removed a glove with his teeth, revealing the same pale, blanched flesh as his face, and pulled up the sleeve of his black combat tunic, baring his forearm to the world. He gave the soldier and scientist one last look.

Aristedes stared blankly but Crumpton gasped and placed a hand instinctively to her mouth in disgust. Nimrod opened his mouth wide, revealing two clean, sharp white fangs. Crumpton had never noticed them before, or they grew when needed, or her mind just refused to process their existence to keep her sane. This man who she had worked alongside for several years had suddenly revealed the frightening reality behind his true nature. She had always known, everybody had, but when you don’t have to witness the mechanics, it was easy to be ignorant.

Nimrod was a vampire.

The man who used to be Dr William Abberton bit down on his exposed forearm, ripping into the flesh. Blood burst everywhere, followed by a flare of sparks. He bit again with a primal roar of rage or pain, blood covering his face, dripping down in rivulets to the floor. He started ripping into the wound with his free hand, revealing amongst the bloody flesh a network of thin wiring that absurdly looked to Crumpton like those rice noodles you found in Chinese restaurants.

Man, machine and vampire, working in perfect harmony.

Aristedes turned away, vomiting. She’d obviously seen some things since coming to the Forge, but Crumpton couldn’t blame her for such a reaction.

‘Crumpton, help me,’ grunted Nimrod through gritted teeth. ‘I’m going to hotwire my cybernetic systems directly into the computer.’

FRITH LOOKED up into the sky, which was now taking on a dark and blood-red quality as the night began to take dominance. He watched as Cassie was thrown around violently, still held by the creature. For the time being, though, the monster’s attention seemed to be focused entirely on the girl, giving what remained of his team a chance to regroup. In the distance, he could hear the welcoming thud of

approaching helicopters.

He looked round quickly at the men who now grouped around him. They were flushed and breathing heavily with the exertion of combat, but they were soldiers, and ready for orders.

‘All right, listen up! Take up attack positions and concentrate all your fire there!’ He pointed at the area of the Nyathoggoth where the limb holding Cassie branched away from the main body. ‘I’m not going to lose another man today.’

‘Sir!’ They responded and moved as one, dropping to their knees and raising their weapons.

‘Fire!’ The air filled with the hammer of automatic rifle fire. Frith moved a short distance away as the bullets hailed into the creature, thumping open a comlink channel. ‘Crumpton, what are you two playing at down there?’

‘I’d love to talk, Frith,’ came Crumpton’s garbled reply, ‘but we’re a little busy.’

‘STAND BY.’ Crumpton cut the comms channel and returned her attention to Nimrod. Wiring snaked from the blood-soaked wound on his forearm, criss-crossing with the filaments that had been ripped from within the computer stack. Crumpton was covered in blood, which had got everywhere, and she felt like a bizarre surgeon in a macabre hospital. Aristedes stood with her rifle, facing the door, unable to look at the visceral scene that had turned her stomach.

Nimrod looked even paler than usual, and Crumpton couldn’t decide whether to admire or pity him. ‘I don’t even know what this is going to do to you. It might be fatal.’

He turned those probing blue eyes on her. ‘I’ll take that risk.’

The eyes closed.

The lights dimmed.

Power fluctuated.

Nimrod began to thrash around, a violent fit vibrating through his entire body, muscles thrown into vicious spasms as he threw back his head with a defining, mechanical scream.

‘Corporal, help me,’ shouted Crumpton, moving to restrain Nimrod before he harmed himself. Behind them, the screen flashed and flared. Aristedes moved across the deck and tried to grab Nimrod’s arms from behind.

‘Nimrod, come back to us!’ Crumpton tried to get through to him, but he continued to buck and thrash.

Then the lights came up and the power stabilised with a consistent hum.

Nimrod’s eyes snapped open.

‘Sir?’ Crumpton asked hesitantly.

‘Connection made.’

* * *

THE TENTACLE TIGHTENED round Cassie’s body even more. If she had needed to breathe, she’d have been dead by now, but the creature had no effect on her.

She heard gunfire, and, twisting round, could see the flash of weapons as Frith’s regrouped team continued their assault. Idiot! Did he want to ruin everything?

A second tentacle snaked out towards her, the domed end moving cautiously, almost smelling its way forward.

‘That’s it,’ whispered Cassie temptingly as the tentacle latched itself, leech like to the gash on her wrist. ‘Got a taste for me, have you? That’s right,’ she cooed. ‘Feed from your mam, there’s a good boy.’

‘Keep firing!’ Frith shouted, raising his side arm, despite the pain coursing through his arm. Time to join in with the fun himself. He took aim and squeezed the trigger, bracing himself against the recoil.

Fountains of blood began to spurt up from joint of the tentacle. ‘That’s it, lads, keep at it!’ Frith pumped another hail of bullets into the creature, and, although it looked impossible for a creature which appeared to be liquid, the limb was beginning to tear away from the body of the Nyathoggoth.

Cassie screamed as she felt the tension around her loosen, and she realised she was falling through the air. The tentacle had sheared clean away from its body and tumbled to the ground. She landed on her back, smashing painfully onto the hard, icy snow.

The thick, snaking limb landed on top of her, and she raised her arms to protect her face from the impact. But when it struck the ground, the tentacle exploded into liquid, drenching Cassie and staining the ground red.

Cassie groaned in pain, but quickly got to her feet, bones cracking back into place as her regenerative abilities kicked in. She saw Frith running across the tundra towards her and she turned to face him. 'You idiot!' she screamed. 'You've just cocked everything up!'

Frith grabbed her arm. 'What do you mean?' he shouted into her face. 'You could have been killed!'

Above them, the Nyathoggoth roared and shuddered, tentacles flailing around like a storm-wracked willow tree.

'Get back!' Without thinking, Frith stepped between Cassie and the creature and brought his weapon to bear as the monster prepared to strike.

Countdown

The central monitor screen flared as data flashed across its surface. The light cast an eerie glow across the faces of Crumpton and Aristedes as they watched in fascination. ‘Second-level access achieved.’ Nimrod’s voice grated, taking on a more metallic rasp than usual.

‘Incredible.’ Crumpton was truly amazed. ‘Try to find the reactor controls.’

‘Working.’ Nimrod was starting to take on the characteristics of a computer, and Crumpton hoped he would be able to come back with his humanity... or whatever, intact.

Glyphs covered the screen as Nimrod began to move through the computer’s systems. He cocked his head, eyes narrowing.

‘What is it?’ asked Crumpton, and she was pleased when he seemed to take on something of his usual demeanor.

‘I have found all automated log files and full historical data. Accessing.’

‘No,’ Crumpton jumped in quickly, and Nimrod stopped. ‘We don’t have the time. Find the reactor controls.’

‘I SUPPOSE it’s too much to ask what the bloody hell is going on here. What did you do to it?’

Cassie glanced from Nyathoggoth to Frith. Above them the creature was finally still, its skin a frozen mass of red. The sudden quiet on the tundra was shocking, broken only by the steady whup-whup-whup of the approaching Merlins. One minute it had been a screaming wall of chaos and now it was nothing more than a statue, moisture dripping down its petrified limbs.

‘I did exactly what you suggested, Frith. I gave the Nyathoggoth a nasty case of indigestion.’

The look on Frith’s face was enough to tell her that she’d better

start at the beginning.

‘You’ve worked out that Nyathoggoth thrives on blood, haven’t you?’ she began, only to be cut short by the sergeant.

‘Just get to the point.’

‘My blood isn’t exactly what you’d call normal,’ she said, bringing up her slashed arm to illustrate the point. ‘Twilight DNA flows through my system, the virus washing through my veins. The legacy started by Nimrod all those years ago and brought full circle by Amelia. Don’t you see, Frith? The Twilight virus attacks DNA, rewriting any genetic coding with its own, dominant strain.’

‘And if it did *that* to you...’ Frith picked up the sentence, finally twigging where Cassie was going with it.

‘Imagine what it would do to an alien creature comprising entirely of living, breathing blood.’

Frith looked up at the giant creature, which was finally beginning to twitch again.

‘I think we’re about to find out.’

With a shriek, Nyathoggoth bucked in the air, its form heaving as it split in half. The two writhing columns twisted around each other, plaiting and condensing into a single unit once more, the colour of its molten skin darkening.

‘Someone doesn’t like his medicine.’

‘It’s working, Frith.’ Cassie cried out excitedly. ‘The virus is taking hold.’

‘That’s great,’ said Frith, ‘but I don’t want to wait around and see what this thing is going to evolve into.’

Turnng his back on the stricken alien, Frith raised his arm in the air to gain the trooper’s attention. ‘Stand by for evac! Prepare to move out!’

As Frith ran to where the choppers were beginning to land, Cassie gazed up at Nyathoggoth, transfixed by the colours that were flowing hypnotically across its surface. This must have been what Amelia had felt as she watched the virus taking hold of me, thought Cassie as the creature began to shrink to the ground, its liquefied tendrils sucking back into the main bulk of its body.

Suddenly she realised she was alone on the ice, the sound of the Merlins and the shouts of the men fading into the distance until her entire perception was filled with nothing other than Nyathoggoth. She

felt its fading, confused mind reach out for her own, tenderly brushing against her consciousness, the brutality and forcefulness of its previous attacks all but gone. Her eyes drooped as she let the creature probe deeper, opening her being to its tender, familiar touch, no longer full of hate and greed but full of concern and, for the first time in its life, true fear.

The creature flowed across the ice towards her, stopping before it reached her still form. She knew exactly how that felt, how terrifying it was to experience the transformation brought about by the virus that had conquered her own blood. The Nyathoggoth understood that she could help it, understood that now they were of the same blood, the same body. They were brother and sister. They were one.

With her eyes still tightly closed, Cassie raised a hand and tenderly stroked the orb of calm liquid that Nyathoggoth had become, a pulsating mass that quivered and swelled to the rhythm of her touch as it rose up before her.

‘You’re beautiful,’ she whispered as she let herself fall forward into its embrace.

NIMROD FLINCHED as if something had slapped him in the face, immediately Crumpton started forward but a raised hand warned her off. Nimrod gasped as his face relaxed, another hurdle vaulted.

‘I’ve located the reactor controls. It’s a fascinating design. I would never have guessed...’

‘While this is all very interesting,’ Crumpton said, cutting him off sharply, ‘and in another time, another place, I would love to chat to you about the intricacies of an alien power system... can you blow them up?’

Nimrod regarded her with a slightly improved opinion.

‘Doctor, I think you’re becoming more like me every day. But to answer your question - yes, it shouldn’t be too difficult to persuade the containment system to breach.’ He paused, his eyes darting from left to right, as if he was seeing the ship’s vast systems scrolling before him. ‘By the looks of it,’ he continued, somewhat subdued, like he couldn’t work out if his latest discover was a blessing or not, ‘I should be able to instigate a time delay.’

‘Sounds too good to be true,’ said Aristedes.

‘Fifteen to twenty minutes,’ he announced. ‘Let’s just hope all that

Tregannan propulsion technology you spent months splicing into the Merlins was worth the price we paid for it.'

But something was still troubling Crumpton. She stood for a second, chewing her bottom lip, before finally summoning the courage.

'Can I just ask a blindingly obvious question, sir?'

'Of course. Doctor,' Nimrod replied through gritted teeth. 'But make it quick. I'm multi-tasking here.'

'We're about to detonate a massive nuclear explosion in what I grant is a remote, but highly visible area. There will be questions, someone will notice, not to mention the damage to the environment - and us, for that matter. We don't want to be responsible for another Chernobyl.'

'Chernobyl will be like a light shower compared to the devastation this creature will bring to the world.'

'Sir,' piped up Aristedes. slapping her hands together with sudden enlightenment. 'There is a way.'

Nimrod and Crumpton turned as one to face the corporal.

'Time is of the essence. Corporal,' snapped Crumpton.

'This ship had a force field...' Aristedes began.

'Which we rendered useless. Your point being?' rasped Nimrod.

'We only disabled one area of the field-generator network. The rest must have gone offline in the power surge. Can we reroute power to bring it back online and slave it into the countdown?'

'Raising it at the critical moment of detonation?' mused Nimrod. 'Thereby containing the explosion,' said Crumpton, warming to the idea. 'A localised blast of that magnitude would have a greater chance of destroying the creature.'

Nimrod slumped against the panel, his strength fading with every passing second. His eyes narrowed. 'I might be able to reroute the projection field to counteract the generators that we destroyed. It would also help in localising the spread of radiation.'

He paused, his face seeming to have lined with age in the last few minutes.

'Can we do it?' asked Crumpton, placing a hand on his shoulder.

'I never say no to a challenge, Doctor.'

FRITH HELPED a wounded trooper up the ramp of Pegasus Two. The

sooner they were out of here the better.

At least the bloody alien seemed to have settled down, doped by Cassie's blood. He turned to look at the purple liquid that rippled with irrational waves, rising up and lapping against each other before crashing off in other directions. He wondered if this mission had been worth it.

Frith's eyes swept the landscape once again as he realised that everyone was accounted for, dead or alive, bar those still aboard the ship. Where was Cassie?

Swearing to himself Frith slammed down his communicator control, opening a channel.

'Crumpton. This is Frith. Come in!'

'Crumpton.'

'What's your status?'

'We're en route to the surface. Nimrod's not in a good way, but he'll live. Have the Merlins arrived?'

'We're all packed and ready to go. I assume you've come up with a way of getting us out of this mess, or are we just running away?'

'A bit of both. What's the status of the alien?'

'Subdued, thanks to Cassie. Is she with you, Doctor?'

'Negative. Isn't she with you?'

'Obviously not!'

'Then you better find her. We'll be with you in ten minutes.'

Frith sighed. 'Acknowledged. Frith out.'

He cut the channel, and looked out from the base of the chopper's cargo ramp. Cassie was nowhere in sight. He frowned. 'Oracle, locate Agent Schofield.'

'I THOUGHT,' grunted Crumpton as she strained under Nimrod's bulk, 'you had a regenerative metabolism? When's it going to kick in? I wasn't really built for hard labour.'

Too weak to even glare, Nimrod stumbled, pressing more of his weight down on her shoulders. Aristedes laboured along beside them, taking the rest of the strain.

'Trust me. Doctor, this is embarrassing me as much as it is you.' Nimrod's head fell forward as he tried to draw into himself, searching for strength, in the back of his mind the countdown was ticking down, second by second, as they made their painfully slow progress. He

knew he had to make a decision.

‘Leave me,’ he croaked.

The two women kept going.

‘I said, leave me.’

‘Not an option I’m afraid, sir,’ grunted Aristedes.

‘Agreed,’ said Crumpton.

‘I could order you,’ grunted Nimrod.

‘I’d like to see you try,’ Crumpton snorted stubbornly. ‘Besides, you’re one of the Forge’s prize assets. I don’t fancy explaining to Crichton that I left you to die.’

Nimrod’s nostrils suddenly flared and his head snapped up.

‘Sir, are you all right?’ asked Aristedes.

‘Stop,’ he said, his voice regaining energy.

‘We can’t -’ protested Crumpton.

‘We’re not alone’

Aristedes let go of Nimrod and brought her rifle up. Footsteps echoed down the corridor.

Cassie wandered slowly into view.

‘Cassie,’ gasped Crumpton. ‘Thank God. Frith thought he’d lost you.’

Nimrod said nothing. He just stared at his protégé.

‘Cassie, help us,’ pleaded Crumpton, but she didn’t move. She stood, silhouetted in the light from the tunnel ahead, statue still. Something was wrong.

‘That’s not Cassie,’ rumbled Nimrod, taking a deep breath as he painfully shrugged off Crumpton’s support and rose to his full height.

Aristedes aimed her rifle instinctively, checking her computer readout at the same time. ‘What do you mean, sir? Her BAN suit signature checks out.’

‘Physically, it’s Cassie,’ Nimrod announced, ‘but we have a cuckoo in the nest.’

Nimrod pushed Crumpton behind him as Cassie took a slow, deliberate step forward. Even in the half-light they could see the hatred that twisted her features. Eyes burning with madness locked onto Nimrod as she crouched down, muscles tightening as she prepared to strike.

‘What’s happened to her?’ asked Crumpton, thinking aloud.

‘Crumpton. Aristedes.’ Nimrod addressed them calmly. ‘I suggest

you run. This could get messy.'

The Final Lesson

Crumpton bolted as Nimrod pushed her bodily forward, past the crouched Cassie, whose attention was focused on Nimrod.

‘I’ll get help.’ she shouted behind her, and pounded on into the corridor.

Aristedes stood side by side with Nimrod, rifle trained on Cassie.

‘You too, Corporal,’ murmured Nimrod, but Aristedes didn’t move. She didn’t flinch, didn’t even blink.

‘No way, sir,’ she said defiantly, stepping forward to place herself between Nimrod and the girl. Cassie glared up at her from her crouched position. ‘Step aside, or I will shoot.’

‘That won’t do any good, Corporal, but I appreciate your efforts,’ drawled Nimrod. ‘Now go!’

Aristedes squeezed down on the trigger of her rifle, but Cassie launched herself forward, slamming into the soldier and taking her down. A volley of random bullets ricocheted around the corridor. The two women tumbled over as they struggled, but Cassie’s superior strength easily matched Aristedes’s. The vampire hauled her opponent to her feet and threw her bodily back down the corridor, where she slammed into the wall with a violent crunch. Aristedes slumped to the floor, unmoving.

‘I trained you well,’ said Nimrod, stepping up before Cassie, ‘but you’re inexperienced. Still angry. And that is the best weapon I have against you.’

Nimrod brought his arms up as Cassie, fangs bared, dived towards him. In his weakened state, he went down easily, caught off guard by the ferocity and strength of her attack. Was the Nyathoggoth boosting her own might? Staring wildly into her demented eyes, Nimrod attempted to roll her off his damaged body, but couldn’t shift the weight that crushed down upon him. Snarling, she swiftly wrapped her powerful thighs tight around his legs so he couldn’t move, his ribs

groaning under the pressure of his polycarbide chest plate being pushed down.

Desperately, he brought the flat of his palm up beneath her chin, snapping her teeth together. The crunch of dislocating jaw resonated around the corridor, but it cracked back into place seconds later as she pressed down harder, Nimrod gasped as he felt a rib pop beneath his armour. This was insane. It couldn't end like this.

'Stop this,' he pushed out towards her with his mind, but found himself coming up against an impenetrable mental wall. Behind Cassie's frenzied eyes lay an insane alien mind, Nyathoggoth. Somewhere deep beneath that malevolent presence, he knew Cassie must have been battling to regain control. By all rights he should have been dead by now. Somehow, despite the immense pressure she must be feeling to succumb to Nyathoggoth's will, his pupil was holding back, stopping the alien using her own hands to deliver the death blow. If there was a chance that the merest aspect of Cassie Schofield's personality existed behind all the anger and malevolence, he could reach her. For a second he heard her calling out to him and let his eyelids fall shut, as he visualised her image in his mind, reaching out to him, yelling his name. Ignoring the pain of a rib spearing his left lung, he began to break through, her figure crystallising in his mind's eye. Cassie. The great experiment. The future.

All he had to do was reach back and...

The burning heat of razor-sharp nails cutting into his forehead ripped him from the trance as the thing using Cassie's body yanked his head back, exposing his throat. He struggled, but realised too late that the last ounce of strength had fled his spent body. Cassie opened her mouth, saliva running eagerly along her gleaming fangs, before she plunged forward to taste Nimrod's rancid flesh.

'ORACLE,' Frith snapped, 'I need a comms channel. Why can't I get through to them?'

'Communication system operating at one hundred per cent efficiency, Sergeant Frith. Reason for communication failure unknown.'

'And what about Schofield? Have you located her?'

'It's all right, Frith,' gasped Crumpton as she sprinted up to the pair of idling Merlins. 'I know exactly where she is.'

‘So where is she? And where’s Nimrod and Aristedes?’

Crumpton rested her hands against her knees as she bent double, sucking in air. ‘We can’t leave vet,’ she wheezed.

Frith groaned. ‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’

THE SOUND of teeth cracking against the polycarbide veneer was sickening. Roaring with anger, Cassie reared up, ready to sink her fangs into him for a second time, giving Nimrod the moment he needed. He lashed upwards, the back of his gauntleted hand striking her across the face, grazing skin from her cheek as she was thrown against the metallic wall of the corridor. She landed on all fours, her head snapping up, ready to come straight back at him.

In a second she was upon him again. Even as he went down, Nimrod couldn’t help thinking of Amelia and her plans for a new breed of vampire. She would have been proud of her creation.

Struggling beneath her, Nimrod grabbed her face, digging his fingers into her eyes. Cassie grunted but refused to yield, slamming her palms flat against the side of his head. She swatted his hands away, nearly popping his arm out its socket. He brought his other arm up, his wrist-mounted crossbow automatically loading with a sharp click. Cassie grabbed the arm, grappling it aside, ripping the bolt from its housing. The crossbow fell aside, a useless collection of metal, but Cassie clutched the bolt triumphantly in her hand. She stared at it in fascination.

Nimrod fell back, the life draining from his body. He had been bested by his student, and now he was going to be killed by his own murder weapon. The irony was not lost on him.

The hunter looked straight into the eyes of the woman who had been his prey, who he had tormented, then accepted as one of his own. As Cassie raised the bolt high over head, he was determined to face death with his eyes wide open. Cassie screamed and plunged the bolt home with sickening force.

Cassie’s eyes widened in surprise and Nimrod felt her go limp. She looked down at the crossbow bolt that she had plunged deep into her own stomach, her blood-speckled hands shaking with the sudden, shocking pain.

‘Nimrod...’ she breathed, before slumping away to his side, her flaccid body rolling on the cold, metallic floor. There was no time to

recover. Grunting, as deep within him his bones shifted back into their customary positions, the vampire hauled himself back to his feet. Head still spinning, he leant over the prone form of Cassie, his experience prompting him to check that she had truly fallen into unconsciousness before letting his gloved fingers wrap around the bolt. His pupil's body bucked as he yanked the device from her stomach, the barbs dislodging a large amount of fatty tissue. No matter. She would begin healing soon enough.

Behind him, Aristedes staggered to her feet, wiping the blood that poured from the gash on her forehead into her eyes. 'Wh... what happened?' she slurred as Nimrod plucked Cassie up by her thin waist and swung her body over his shoulder. Luckily, she couldn't see the agony on his face in the shadows.

'I think Cassie's just shown someone who's the boss...'

'IF YOU WANT A JOB DONE, do it yourself,' Frith grumbled to himself as he ran down the corridor, pistol cocked and ready to fire. On his belt hung one of Nimrod's crossbow bolts. He knew what to do if it came down to it.

He stopped when he heard a shuffling, scraping sound coming from the corridor ahead. This was it. He brought the gun up with his good arm and aimed into the darkness.

'Frith, I hope you're not going to shoot me. I've had a very bad day.' Nimrod lurched from the shadows, Cassie's limp form slung over one shoulder, the other providing support for the dazed Aristedes. Swiftly holstering his gun, Frith stepped forward, slipping his arm around the corporal to relieve Nimrod of at least one of his burdens. Without even a thank you - although to be honest, Frith may have had a coronary if he had offered one - Nimrod twisted so Cassie's body fell loosely from his shoulder into his open arms.

'Is she...?' Frith asked as he took in the extent of Cassie's injuries. 'She'll live,' replied Nimrod. 'Trust me, it runs in the family.'

'Alert.' crooned Oracle urgently over the comlink. 'Detonation in two minutes. Evacuation imperative.'

As they picked up speed down the corridor towards the surface, Frith looked heavenwards. 'It wouldn't feel like a proper mission without a big explosion.'

NIMROD STARED out of a window aboard Pegasus Two as the ice shrank away beneath them and the Merlin leapt into the air. Around him, the rest of the team had strapped in, a ragtag band of survivors. Cassie was still unconscious, and Aristedes sported an emergency bandage across her temples.

The Merlin listed to the left as, in formation with Pegasus Three, it swung around, preparing to leave the crash site, Oracle's ominous countdown still ringing in all their ears. Nimrod let his eyes fall back down to the scene below, the bodies left on the ice like dolls, ready to be cleaned up in the firestorm, and above them the frozen form of Nyathoggoth, paralysed by trying to absorb the Twilight virus.

Despite himself, Nimrod couldn't help but feel a slight swell of pride. Planets and civilisations had fallen trying to bring that creature down and yet, in the end, it had been stopped by a culture that he had created all those years ago in a shabby little laboratory. The destruction of such a rare and powerful life form was regrettable, of course, but there would be other missions. Other harvests.

As he stared at the diminishing alien, its now mottled-purple tentacles still frozen in the bitter air, a frown creased his forehead. Something was pushing against his consciousness. A presence that was becoming familiar. He turned and found Cassie sitting up on the stretcher, eyes bright and alert.

'You're making a mistake,' she breathed quietly.

Nimrod regarded her for a second. 'Nyathoggoth, I presume,' he said, nodding in greeting.

Cassie's lips pulled back into a wide grin that was not her own.

In a blur of practised movement, Frith and Aristedes sprang to their feet, their weapons cocked in scant seconds and trained on Cassie.

Nimrod sprang to his feet, arm outstretched to the two soldiers. 'No, leave her!'

'Whatever you're going to do, Nimrod, do it fast,' grunted Frith through gritted teeth.

'Bullets won't solve this. Frith. But, just in case...' Nimrod locked eyes with Frith, and the sergeant returned the look with an understanding nod.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'We're not going anywhere.'

Cassie watched the exchange in curious amusement, having made

no attempt to free herself from her restraining bonds. Nimrod took a step forward.

‘So,’ he growled at her. ‘You finally found a way to absorb the virus.’

‘Indeed,’ she crooned with a contented smile, stopping short of licking her bloodless lips. ‘A most seductive taste. And, having been silent for so very long, I find the sensation of having voice to be a fascinating experience.’

‘I’m so pleased.’

‘And this... thing that washes through my... our veins. I can feel its power. You are a god amongst this –’ Cassie turned to look at Frith and Aristedes with disgusted eyes ‘- cattle. And yet you choose to limit yourself, to scurry like a scavenging rat through dark tunnels on the whim of these mortal creatures.’

Nimrod remained silent, impassive.

Engines screamed as two Merlin helicopters cut through the dark Lapland air, pulling away from the crash site that blighted the tundra. In the distance, the barbed spike of the alien spacecraft jutted out above the horizon like an ugly wound, receding fast. Standing at its base, the rippling mass of the Nyathoggoth, now reformed, stretched forth billowing, blood-red tendrils towards the fleeing choppers.

‘Pegasus Two, come in,’ Crumpton’s voice crackled through the speakers suspended from the roof of the cramped space. ‘Frith, what’s going on over there?’

Frith shifted his position slightly, easing rapidly cramping muscles as he gripped his rifle tight, unable to reply. ‘Not now, Crumpton.’ he breathed.

Cassie cocked her head, staring at Nimrod intently. ‘Why are you leaving me, brother?’

‘I am not your brother.’

‘We are of the same blood, are we not?’ Nyathoggoth hissed through Cassie’s voice. ‘The same infection runs through our bodies, desecrating our very being, making us siblings of mutation. The three of us joined together: this girl, Nyathoggoth and the great hunter himself. We taste what the universe decrees as unholy. A trinity forged in blood.’

Nimrod didn’t reply. He didn’t even move.

‘Do you not see the potential? You long to change your world, to

evolve your race here on this blue rock. Your lifelong work, yet, when you finally have your destiny in your grasp, you choose to destroy instead of create and unite.’ Cassie laughed. ‘For King and country. The most powerful being to walk the planet, and you can’t even abandon an outdated concept of sovereignty.’

‘I chose my own path, and I chose to walk it alone.’

‘You’re pathetic. How can you fail to see that you hold the key to humanity’s evolution in your hands? We are one, my brother. We can become an unmovable force together, shaping your future, the power of Nyathoggoth at your command.’

‘Go on,’ urged Nimrod gently, drawing a shocked glance from Frith.

Cassie smiled slyly.

‘Turn your metal machines back. Return to the craft and cancel the reactor countdown you set in progress, and I will pledge my allegiance to your cause. Your vision. My power. You *can* see it, can’t you, Nimrod?’

Nimrod staggered under the psychic barrage that suddenly assaulted his mind, but he steadied himself, offering himself to the creature. He walked slowly across the cabin to tower over Cassie’s body. His mind was flooded with images, locked with that of the Nyathoggoth. He saw a world at his feet, the masses spread out below him, their arms reaching up to their new Messiah. A human race made powerful by alien technology, ready to strike out into the universe. The Forge’s mission made reality. This was the future that Nyathoggoth promised, this was the destiny that awaited them. This was the union.

And then he felt her, drowning in the crashing swell of the Nyathoggoth’s overpowering and seductive mind, but she hadn’t succumbed...

Cassie.

Nimrod bent down until his eyes came level with the girl’s. ‘Oh, yes, Nyathoggoth,’ drawled Nimrod. ‘I see it all too clearly.’

‘Detonation in 15 seconds,’ announced Oracle.

‘Frith, would you do the honours?’ Nimrod asked quickly, Cassie’s face creasing in snarling anger.

‘Ten seconds.’

‘You fool!’ she screamed.

Frith spoke urgently into his comlink. 'Pegasus Two, Pegasus Three. Punch it. Let's see what these souped-up engines can really do.'

'Detonation in... five...

'Four...

'Three...

'Two...

'One.'

THE MERLINS SLICED through the sky, suddenly leaping forward as a powerful fuel-injection system, augmented by alien fuel cells, fired through the Rolls-Royce engines.

Far behind, the Nyathoggoth sent a silent scream of rage after the receding aircraft as the air around its immense bulk fizzed and crackled with energy. The air flashed red around the ship as the alien force field once again imprisoned the malevolent entity.

Within the localised area, a blaze of frightening, destructive energy suddenly erupted from the heart of the buried ship, the metal hull ripping apart and vaporising in a second.

The destructive wave pummelled against the force field, tearing into the bloody, liquid flesh of the creature that had destroyed civilisations, pulling it apart molecule by molecule, atom after atom.

Pegasus Two bucked as the shockwave hit it, sending Frith tumbling, Aristedes too. The chopper quickly righted as the pilot skilfully compensated.

'Anti-EMP shielding holding,' announced Oracle. Around them, the windows automatically dimmed to cut the blinding light from the reactor explosion.

Cassie thrashed on the stretcher, screaming out the pain of an alien creature. Next to her knelt Nimrod, his head thrown back, the whites of his eyes showing sickeningly. Frith couldn't tell if he was meditating or in pain.

As the Merlin levelled out, Frith pushed Aristedes towards Cassie. 'Help me!' he shouted at his second in command, and they both practically dived on the young girl, holding down her powerful frame until the convulsions began to subside.

'Frith.'

As Cassie went limp. Frith jumped at the voice and the gloved hand that rested on his back. Nimrod towered above him, looking

tired and ashen, but this was Nimrod. That never made much difference.

Uncharacteristically, Nimrod helped Frith and Aristedes to their feet, and together they looked down at Cassie's sweat-doused and pallid features. She was no longer contorted with hatred, and after a few seconds, her breathing became regular and calm.

'She's sleeping peacefully,' said Nimrod.

Frith had picked up his rifle from where it had fallen. 'What about laughing boy?'

'Don't worry, Sergeant. The link was severed.'

'Pegasus Two, please come in!' Crumpton crackled once again over the speakers.

Frith glanced wearily at Aristedes. 'Go and put her out of her misery, Corporal. Tell the good doctor we're going home.'

Aristedes grinned. 'Yes, sir,' she said and turned to make her way to the cockpit.

As the last vibrations of the explosion merged with the hypnotic, muted thudding of the rotor blades, Frith turned to say something to Nimrod, but the hulking, black-clad field agent had stalked away to the back of the Merlin and strapped himself into a seat away from the rest of the team.

Endings and Beginnings

The Forge Alpha Facility, Dartmoor - Present Day

Crichton looked down at the photo, running his finger around the mahogany frame. His younger self smiled back at him, flanked on either side by two other uniformed officers. Bill Dalton and Archie Brimmicombe-Wood. Old friends in happier times.

Casually he dropped the picture into the cardboard box, and reached out for the reassuring feel of the crystal tumbler. He took a sip of the whisky. Perhaps there would be happier times in the future. Maybe it was time to seek out those old friends. But then, they said that no one left the Forge...

The buzzer cut through his thoughts. Not looking up, the soon-to-be-retired Deputy-Director of Department C4 pressed a button set into his desk and heard the hiss of his office door sliding open.

Without looking up, he continued to pack his last remaining possessions into the box. The leather of Nimrod's coat creaked as he came to a halt in front of the desk. Why he insisted on wearing a heavy winter coat within the air-conditioned halls of the Forge was beyond Crichton, but it really wasn't his concern any more. Finally, when the last memories of his previous life were safely stowed, Crichton allowed himself to look up and meet those piercing blue eyes.

'Well,' he began, pushing back from the desk and rising from the worn seat, 'I'm done.' He looked around the office, the walls now stripped of maps and photographs. 'I guess you'll be getting the decorators in. Can't see wood panels and the old-school tie being your style somehow.'

'I will be making a few changes,' Nimrod agreed, emotion completely absent from his voice. Crichton couldn't help but grin back, a smile fuelled not by friendship but by sheer relief that he

would never have to see that God-forsaken face ever again.

The two men stood in the silent room and took one last look at each other, one final battle of wills.

Crichton was the first to break the staring contest. There was no need to play any more. Straightening his suit jacket, he held out a hand. 'Congratulations, Deputy-Director Abberton.'

Nimrod looked at the hand, but didn't take it. 'Thank you, Mr Crichton.'

'That's the first time I've been called that in a very long time,' Crichton said, more to himself than to Nimrod. 'I'm sure I'll get used to it.'

'I'm sure you will.'

Crichton straightened his tie and, in embarrassed silence, picked up his box of belongings and walked towards the door. It opened on cue. Nimrod hadn't moved.

Crichton took one last look at the room. 'Good luck,' he said, before stepping through the door and into his future.

NIMROD LOOKED down at the young girl sleeping soundly beneath the starched white sheets. The face had lost all the harshness it had taken on since she had arrived at the Forge, and it was entirely possible this was the most undisturbed, nightmare-free sleep she'd had in years.

Cassie stirred briefly as she shifted her sleeping position, a lock of hair falling over her eyes. Nimrod resisted the disturbing urge to brush it aside, banishing it to the hidden place of his mind where any vaguely human urge was buried deep within his psyche.

Cassie had drifted in and out of consciousness since the extraction team's arrival back at the Forge just over a week ago, and she'd been a permanent resident of the medical bay since then. For the first couple of days, she had thrashed around in sweat-drenched sheets, clawed hands fending off whatever inner demons her nightmares were throwing at her. The girl's encounter with the Nyathoggoth had sent her telepathic abilities crashing off the scale, her synaptic pathways firing with a fierceness that forced even Nimrod to close off his own mind from that of his pupil. He was satisfied that the presence of the Nyathoggoth inside her had been banished, but her contact with the creature had seemingly pushed her abilities to another level entirely. One that went beyond Nimrod's own telepathic senses.

After those first fitful days, Cassie had eventually settled down into a calmer sleep pattern, the moments of screaming and imagined terror gradually being replaced by restful sleep. She was barely awake to take a sip of water, or be administered medication and nutritional supplements, before lapsing back into oblivion, her vampiric healing abilities all but shutting her body down to heal any damage that may have been caused.

And now they were here.

Cassie murmured quietly and her eyes flickered slowly open. They immediately locked onto the piercing blue of Nimrod's.

'Welcome back, Cassie,' he murmured, attempting an approximation of a smile, but it probably looked more like he was in pain. She said nothing, her eyes flicking to the glass of water at the side of the bed. In uncomfortable silence, Nimrod stepped forward and handed her the glass. Cassie struggled to sit up in the bed, then drank gratefully, draining the liquid, before lying back.

Eventually she spoke.

'We did it, then?'

'Yes, we did it. You did it.'

She laughed a strange, bitter laugh. 'Me? I let that thing take me over, walk into my mind. I should have been able to fight it off and that could have cost us the mission.'

'Put it down to experience.'

'Don't try to be nice to me, Nimrod. It doesn't suit you.'

'On the contrary,' he continued, 'the experience of conversing with the Nyathoggoth through you provided a fascinating insight into the mind of the creature. It's not everybody who has been host to a powerful alien mind. You'll know better next time.'

Cassie's eyes widened momentarily. 'Next time?'

'Yes. Next time.' Nimrod produced a small, grey, bullet-shaped object from his pocket - a data card - and placed it on the bedside cabinet.

'What's that?' asked Cassie, eyeing the data card with suspicion.

'Your new orders. Congratulations, Cassie. Effective immediate, you have been promoted to full field agent, active status. Study the orders in detail. You will receive a full briefing in two days and I expect you to be ready.' He turned to go, but stopped. 'Welcome to the Forge,' he said.

Nimrod turned and began to stride from the medical wing. 'Nimrod, wait!'

He stopped at the door and turned to find Cassie out of bed and padding on bare feet after him. He looked at her questioningly, one eyebrow raised.

Cassie swallowed, that defiant gleam in her eye he had come to know so well. 'Evelyn Smythe.'

'What about her?'

'It didn't happen like that. I know you were messing with my mind, but I didn't kill Evelyn Smythe. She's alive and out there somewhere.'

'Of course,' conceded Nimrod. 'I should have known you were more than strong enough to resist the conditioning. I must get Crumpton to refine the process.'

Master and pupil stood facing each other for several seconds. 'And,' continued Nimrod probingly, 'what about your son?'

Cassie's eyes narrowed in confusion. 'What are you talking about? I don't have a son, Nimrod.'

The hint of a smile - a genuine smile - flickered on Nimrod's lips. 'No. Of course you don't. My mistake.'

Cassie shook her head, dismissing Nimrod's seemingly odd behaviour.

Get some more rest, Cassie. I'll see you in two days.'

FRITH REACHED for his coffee and took a sip, wincing as the bitterness swept over his taste buds. It didn't make being back in the comfort of Central Ops any better.

'You knew, with all the superior alien technology we have slopping around here,' he moaned out loud, 'you'd think someone would be able to fix the coffee machines. This still tastes like shit.'

'You never know, Frith,' said Crumpton from her console beside him. 'I'm still going through all the data that Nimrod managed to download from the spacecraft while he was hooked up to the computer. There may be the recipe for the perfect fair-trade blend in here somewhere.'

Frith snorted in laughter. 'Well, it would be nice compensation for putting up with our new Deputy-Director.' He threw the empty plastic cup into the recycling bin by his feet in barely disguised disgust.

Crumpton wasn't really listening. She was too busy poring over the data brimming across her screen. Frith couldn't blame her. Nimrod had provided her with years of research when he'd backed up the alien ship's files into his own implants. Granted, she'd been mighty pissed off when she realised that he hadn't told her he'd done it in the first place - but the realisation of what he'd salvaged had soon piqued that scientific curiosity of hers. She was like a pig in the brown stuff.

He should have guessed that Nimrod wouldn't have come back completely empty-handed.

The console in front of him beeped and Frith leant forward, toggling a switch. The screen in front of him flared and he smiled as Aristedes's face came into view, is the old man away, Corporal?'

'Yes, sir. Nestwatcher has just confirmed that his chopper has left the area safely.'

'So the old bastard broke the curse and made it out of here.'

'Looks like it,' agreed the corporal.

You'd better get back down here,' said Frith, consulting a clipboard. 'Security briefing at 1100 hours. The new boss wants to run some new procedures past us.'

'Sounds fun. I'll be there in ten. Aristedes out'

The screen went black. Frith looked around him, taking in the hustle and bustle of the Central Ops. So Crichton had managed to get out? There was hope for them all.

NIMROD OPENED the file on the computer screen in front of him, a photograph of his predecessor scrolling up on the screen. With no hint of emotion, he tapped a sequence into the keyboard.

Across Crichton's picture flashed the legend 'TERMINATION ORDER APPROVED'.

He closed the file down and opened a new one. A picture of Cassie looked back at him. He entered yet more information into the keyboard, and beneath the name 'Cassie Schofield' scrawled new information: 'CODE NAME: ARTEMIS'.

He closed the file down and the screen went blank. Cassie would be departing for Norway in just under a week and they still had a lot of ground to cover. He pulled a folder from the desk in front of him and opened it, scattering various documents and pictures. One picture showed the front of a building, a garish neon sign bearing the words

‘The Dusk’ over the door. Nimrod selected a picture from the collection of documents, his eyes examining the surveillance picture intently. It showed a thickset man with a mop of tightly curled blond hair chatting animatedly to an unseen companion, the garish colours of his coat blurred but still distinct despite the graininess of the satellite picture.

‘Oracle.’ Nimrod spoke into the air, never taking his eyes from the jocular face of the man.

‘Online, Deputy-Director.’

Nimrod leant back in the chair, thinking for a second, before speaking. ‘Commence Project: Lazarus.’

THE OLD SAMI reindeer herder trudged across the grey-white of the Lapland tundra, surrounded by a brown sea of the animals that were his lifeline to living in this harsh climate.

He stopped and looked towards the horizon, scratching his rough, beardy stubble. There was talk coming from the other villages. Talk of bad things happening way out there on the tundra. There were hushed words over glasses of beer in drinking holes that Stallo was abroad.

The herder snorted and slapped the rump of one of the beasts, driving the herd along. Stallo! Ha! It was just a way of making sense of what they’d heard about the villages that had been found deserted. He’d seen stranger things than abandoned villages in his thirty years trudging through this wasteland.

The herder shook his head and banished thoughts of bogeymen from his childhood nightmares. He crunched on towards home.

The footprints were left crisp and clear in the hard snow, ice crystals glinting in the ever-dwindling light of the sun.

Slowly, barely visible, the stark snow began to colour a washed-out pink, the colour bleeding and staining the snow as a syrupy, blood-red liquid began to bubble and pool, filling the impression of the boot.

The liquid remained for a few, brief seconds, viscous and oily, before, as quickly and as unnoticed as it came, the substance began to dissipate through the snow, vanishing back into the cold earth, leaving just the clean white snow of the Lapland tundra...

The Forge returns in DOCTOR WHO - PROJECT: LAZARUS, available now on CD from Big Finish Productions...

Afterword

The story of the Forge began in 1996 with a submission to a BBC contest for new science fiction plays. Deep beneath Dartmoor, the secret black-ops organisation known only as Bedlam was hard at work, mucking about with human DNA, as an increasingly isolationist Britain faced massive social upheaval. Bedlam's work was cut short by an even shorter rejection letter.

Fast forward three years, and Bedlam would be saved by a change of heart from Gary Russell over a cup of tea. Our proposal to Big Finish, *Blood Money*, was one of several vampire stories being considered by Gary for the company's range of *Doctor Who* audios, and, initially, the pitch had failed to impress to him. You win some, you lose some. Or so we thought.

Nearly a year later, Gary had dusted off the pitch for another look, and had found something that piqued his interest. The nest of vampires that ran the backstreet casino, the Dusk, kept the local authorities sweet by regularly donating their victims' blood to hospitals and blood banks in the area. Literally, blood money.

The notion of a government-approved Nosferatu appealed to him and, when Mark dropped in on Gary one afternoon at home, we received the surprise request to provide a second treatment and subsequently a script, which eventually became *Project: Twilight*. Bedlam was granted a reprieve.

Although Bedlam would play a major part in the plot of *Project: Twilight*, it lurked, appropriately enough, in the nether regions of the drama's back story. We stumbled upon early British vampire legends of the undead spreading their infection as a plague, and from there the idea quickly came of modern vampires being the result of a man-made plague, the result of botched genetic tampering in the bowels of Bedlam - or, as it had become known, the Forge, so as to avoid any confusion with another Big Finish production, *Minuet in Hell*.

The Forge had unleashed an unstoppable disease that needed to be

wiped out by one of their own - the mysterious vampire hunter code-named Nimrod. In the original *Project: Twilight*, Nimrod didn't exist, his place being taken by the character of Askran, a villain from the embryonic series of Audio Visuals adventures, which we had both been fans of. Askran's role was central to the plot, but when he became Nimrod after Gary nixed the use of Askran, things changed. We liked our mysterious man in black from the off, this stalking presence, aiv\avs in the shadows (and being pretty unpleasant in the process). But in the shadows is where he stayed for most of *Project: Twilight's* running time, becoming nothing more than a blunt instrument and a plot device to provide some drama for the real villains of the piece, Reggie and Amelia.

But, ironically, as Nimrod's role in the action was diminished to that of a phantom, his influence on the piece grew to the point where he came to our rescue and got us out of a corner we'd written ourselves into. We decided to make Nimrod, and the cowardly Dr William Abberton, the progenitor of the Forge's vampire programme seen in the very first scene, one and the same character. Left for dead on the eve of the vampires' escape from the Forge's Dartmoor location. Abberton injects himself with the Twilight virus to save himself from certain death, thus becoming the thing he hates most. He tasks himself with hunting down the abhorrence he has foisted on the world over the next century. Somewhere in the intervening years, Dr William Abberton morphs into Nimrod, an augmented vampire/cyborg. As he says in *Project: Twilight* 'I don't know where man, machine or vampire ends or begins any more.'

The goalposts had shifted for the better, and the story fell into place. Nimrod became more than the token thug he had been up to this point. He had purpose. He became central to the story. For King and country, isn't that what they say?

But it wasn't until the recording of *Project: Twilight* that the character of Nimrod would be complete. On the first day, we met Stephen Chance, who Gary Russell had selected to play the part.

'Hi, I'm Stephen,' this softly spoken figure introduced himself. 'I'm playing Nimrod.' The two of us glanced at each other worriedly. With a voice like that? Not bloody likely mate!

And then he recorded his first scene, facing off against the always energetic and ebullient Colin Baker. When Stephen spoke his first

lines, a voice that could only be described as gargling glass erupted from this most gentle of actors. It's not very often that you see Colin Baker rendered speechless, but this was one of those occasions. Gary Russell says in the book *Doctor Who: The New Audio Adventures - The Inside Story*: 'None of us could believe that such evil could exude from such a nice man.'

It was at this point that everything changed. It was true to say that there was always half an eye on a sequel to *Project: Twilight*, but we thought that the focus would remain with our chief villain, Amelia Doory. But Stephen Chance's chilling turn as Nimrod took us in a completely different direction. The way we wrote Nimrod from that day on was utterly influenced by his performance - without it, we may not even have written for him again. He's barely in *Project: Twilight* in real terms, but Stephen utterly dominates it.

Those who enjoyed *Project: Twilight* also seemed to enjoy Nimrod, so when the sequel, *Project: Lazarus*, was commissioned, we knew exactly where we wanted to take it. Nimrod has taken control of the Forge, becoming its driving force instead of just a field agent. He shapes those around him, nobody free from his skewed morality and desire to rip alien technology from its owners like a beating heart.

And so we come to *Project: Valhalla*. Without Stephen Chance's performance, we doubt this book would ever have been written. Amelia, fun though she was, could never have spawned a spin-off of this nature (and, if you're interested, we know where she is, and one day, we might tell you). We wouldn't be making plans for a second sequel to *Project: Twilight*, although these are still in the embryonic stages (sorry, Gary!), and we wouldn't be moving the Forge into another medium with the launch of a web comic, one featuring the Forge roster as seen in *Project: Valhalla*. So, in way of some acknowledgements, a big thanks to Stephen Chance for making Nimrod what he is, we couldn't have done this without you.

We'd also like to thank the casts of the two *Project* audios, especially Rosie Cavaliero for being a brilliant Cassie and for coming back to do the sequel; Colin Baker for always being enthusiastic and terribly nice about what we've written; and our favourite Maggie Stables for entertaining stories, convention laughs, for that heart-wrenching scene at the end of *Lazarus* and, most of all, |just for being Evelyn. Thanks too to Stuart Manning for that stunning cover (and,

no, that isn't Stephen Chance!) and Joe Lidster for Major Kirby (and for liking *that* line). And thanks to you lot for listening and reading. Remember, no one leaves the Forge...

Finally, we'd like to thank editor Ian Farrington for encouragement and patience above and beyond (and more curries than are probably healthy), and most of all Gary Russell, for good friendship, for lending us the keys to this fantastic car, and for refusing to accept that terrible first episode of *Project: Twilight* (where are we up to now? Sixteen-year-old fan fiction?).

Cavan Scott and Mark Wright, October 2005

About the Authors

Cavan Scott spends his days editing kids magazines, ensuring that the next generation receive their monthly fix of everything from Power Rangers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Spider-Man to the brand-new adventures of Muffin the Mule.

As well as collaborating with Mark Wright on their Big Finish *Doctor Who* adventures, Cavan has scripted the *Tomorrow People* play *The Warlock's Dance* and sent Judge Dredd to Brit Cit in *For King and Country*.

He is currently working on an Edgar Allen-Poe-inspired graphic novel and the new Forge web-comic, *Project: Longinus*. Cavan lives in Bristol with his wife Clare, who somehow manages to put up with all his various obsessions. His favourite dish is faggots and mash.

With Cavan Scott, Mark Wright is the author of three *Doctor Who* audio adventures for Big Finish - *Project: Twilight* (featuring the first appearance of Nimrod and the Forge), *The Church and the Crown* and *Project: Lazarus*. Together, they have also contributed several short stories to Big Finish's ranges of *Short Trips* and *Professor Bernice Summerfield* anthology collections.

Mark's solo projects for Big Finish include an audio adaptation of Bryan Talbot's epic graphic novel, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, starring David Tennant, and a *Tomorrow People* adventure, *The Slarvian Menace*.

As a journalist, Mark has written for many newspapers and magazines on the subjects of film, television and technology and is a regular contributor to radio and television programmes, invariably on soap operas. He is the author of the books *24 Season Two: The Unofficial Guide* and *The Top 1001 DVDs You Should Own*.

Project: Valhalla is his first novel.

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